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ROBIN HOOD'S BARN



ALICE BROWN

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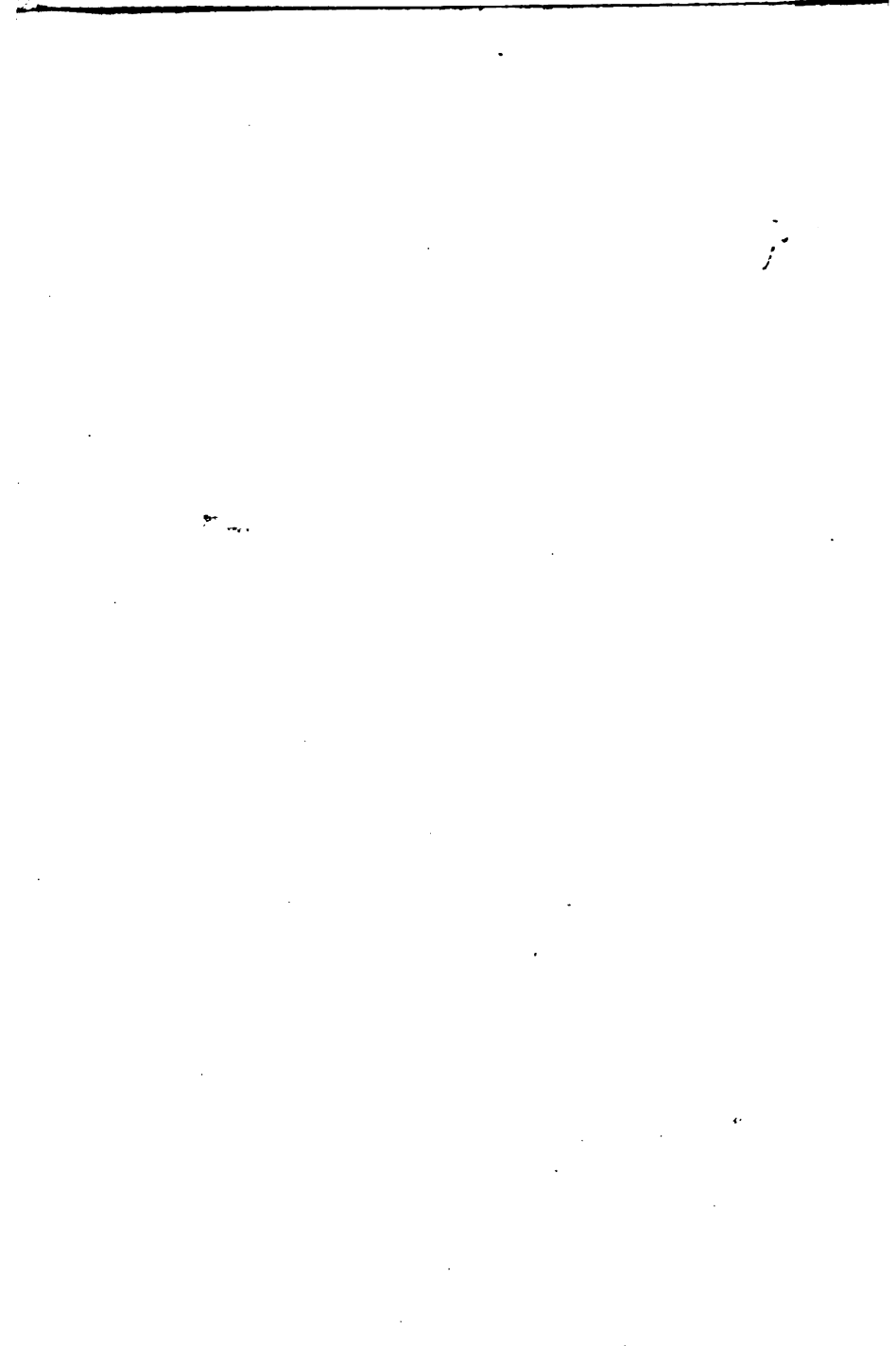
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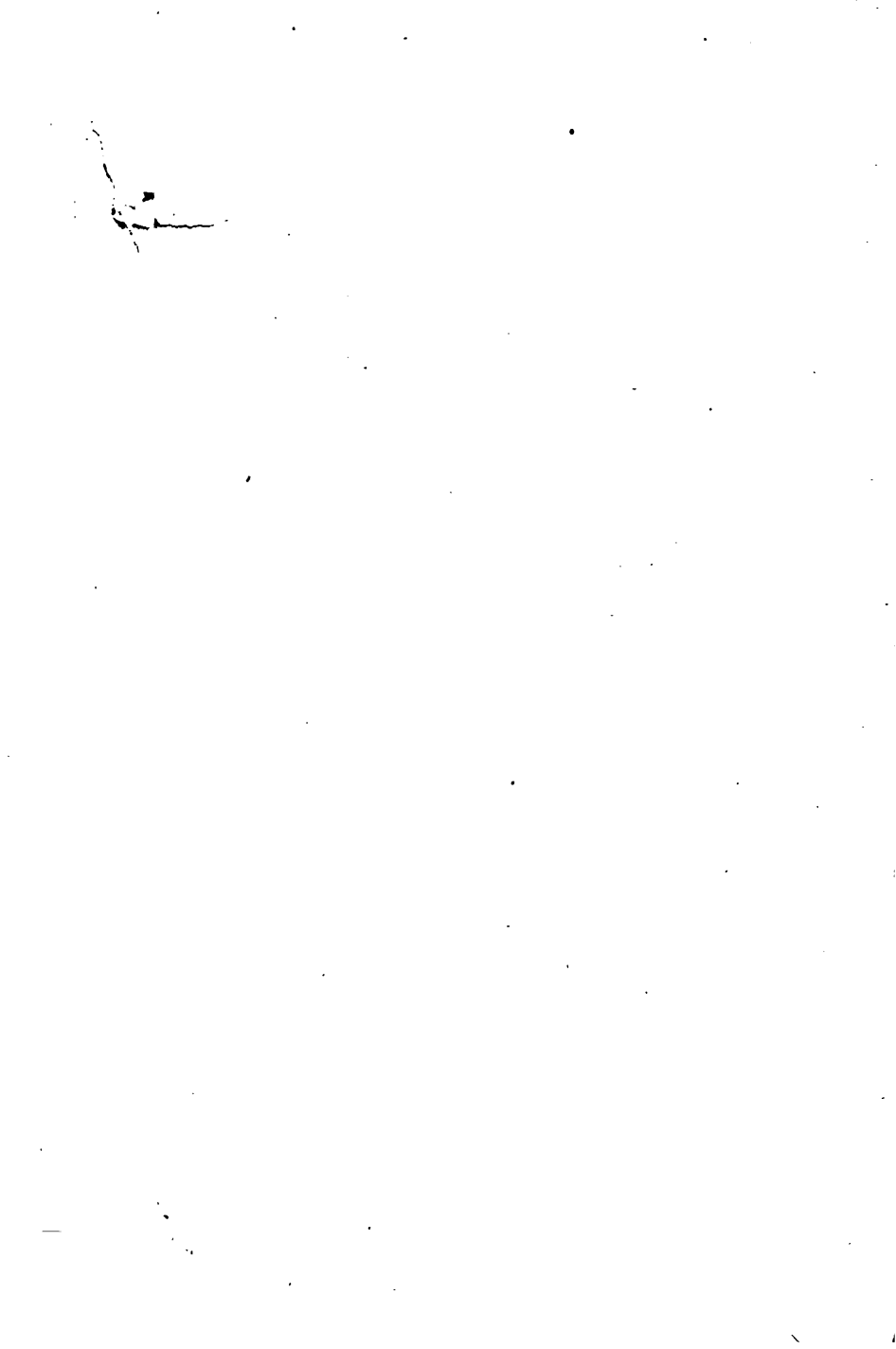
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ROBIN HOOD'S BARN .



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"ROBIN HOOD'S BARN—'ALL OUTDOORS'"

ROBIN HOOD'S BARN

BY
ALICE BROWN

New York
THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

1913

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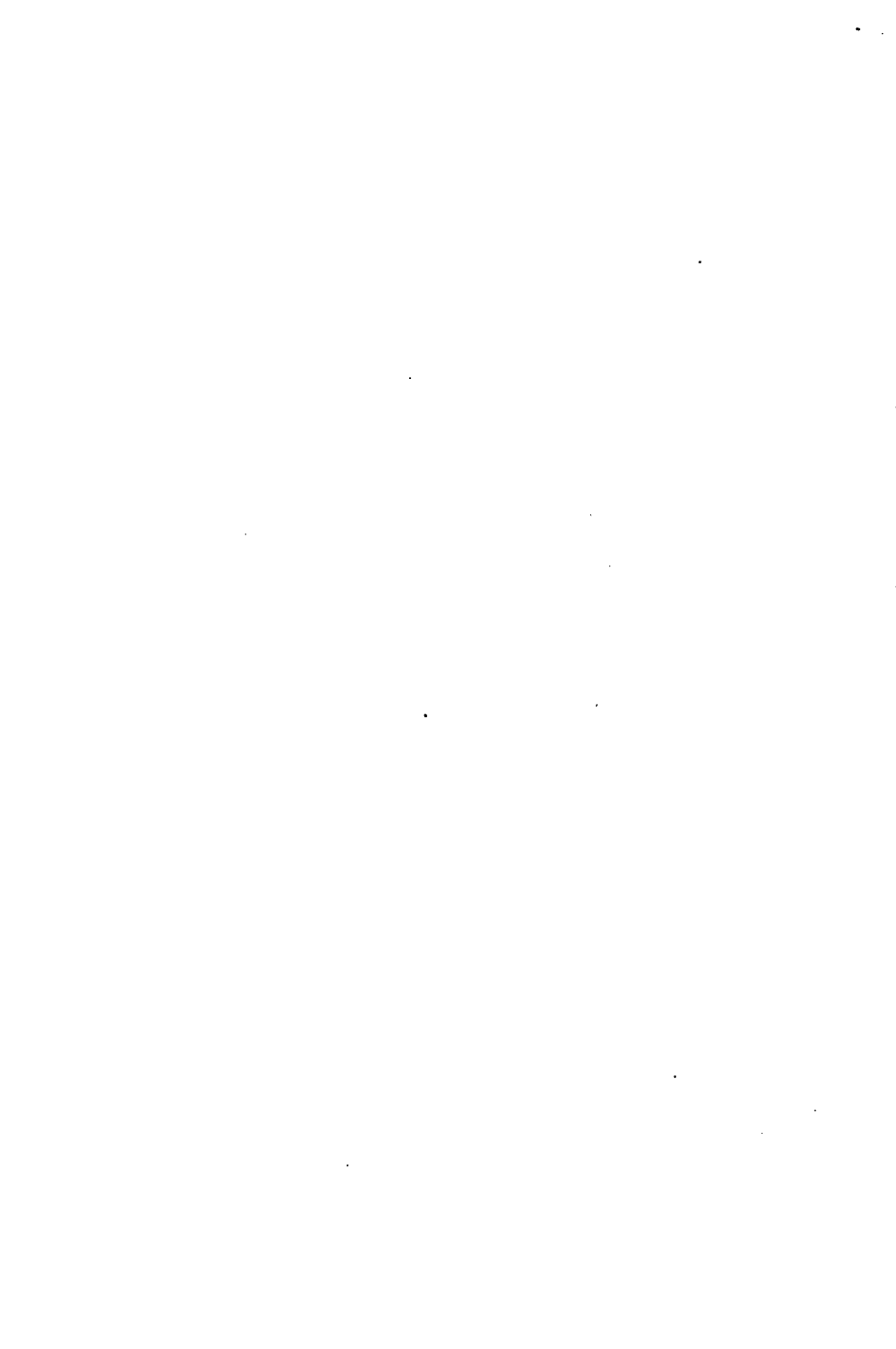
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CHAPTER I

ROBIN HOOD'S BARN

I

It was a spring day in the city, and Alaric Stayson, looking up from his miscellany of papers on the great table under his attic roof, pushed the hair back from his forehead and permitted himself to wonder languidly whether things could be actually going on in the country as he imagined them, or if the birds, too, had undertaken tasks they did not more than half believe in, and the kindling year was estimating itself, not as an irresistible efflorescence of beauty, but a force for putting out leaves and turning in as much provender as it could contrive toward the mysterious general scheme. Stayson could have lived in a more sympathetic environment; but thus far most outer lendings

affected him only momentarily, so bent was his mind on what it had yet to do. He was young and an accredited journalist; but he had a deterring habit of reflection, and even in the days when he was roistering about with "the boys", excelling them in stories for the paper, he heard whispers from an uneasy sense, at twilight maybe, or on nights when the moon is urgent in recalling even the city laborer, forgetful at last of the actual right rewards of things, that it is not always May. Something told him, after the old fashion, to rejoice in the day of his youth, but to remember that if you do not bend the back and line the brow in learning your trade, you will be bankrupt of art in the years when there is no pleasure in them. He could do, without turning his hand over, the "stunts" the paper set him, like a lad who can play Fisher's Hornpipe by instinct; but this was not all he wanted to do. The big orchestra was waiting—he was always conscious

of that—the concertmaster conspicuous in the front of the ordered throng, the leader with his baton lifted, that baton as regnant over the music of the world as a king's sceptre used to be. Stayson was to play in this great company—not as a leader, for that was too arrogant a hope—and never perhaps his own song, but to be at least skilled in the most worshipful assemblage, so he thought, on earth: the guild of literary men. Meantime, in the pauses of routine, he had written the greater part of a novel, and then thrown it aside in despondency. It was accurately skilful and very clever, but the stilted masque of life, not life itself. Perhaps, he reasoned, he had not known enough about life. There were secret cupboards the boys glanced into quite frankly, without seeming afterward to have lost a whit of their sane wholesomeness; but the cupboards looked disordered to him, they even smelt a little of the mould of immemorial decay, and

an inner fastidiousness rebelled at opening their doors. Better, he sometimes thought, burn down the house of being, and see what phoenix the eternally moving spirit of life would decree to rise from the enriching ashes. Then he was accustomed to ponder if there was one sole matter with him: that he was a prig. But the boys, the hardiest of them, never seemed to find him so. He was prime favorite, and in that he took comfort that briefly nourished his self-respect and helped him live. But he still could not write in the least as he wished, and even, he began to see, because of his very passion for art. He had been so determined to do his best that he had not yet escaped from the tyranny of the academic models he had set himself. Perhaps he never could escape.

At last he threw up his job, capriciously as the boys thought, and, with a kind of luck which seemed, with him, to be the inevitable induction of right ways, got the ill-paid task of

doing a statesman's biography. It proved to be in the end a great biography; other statesmen read it and commended, the politician frowned over it to learn the patter the constituency liked, and literary men went out of their way to praise the enveloping style. He was made, his exultant spirit told him at first. Not a week had the book been out before he was asked to write the life of Gilman Speed, the novelist, the well-beloved, and a pile of most precious material was showered on his table with the promise of more, hiding in safes, when that should be finished. Then he lost himself in the bewildering simplicities of Speed's career, so lucid at every point, and yet a life with a question in it. There was the row of Speed's books—he knew them by heart presently—written out of a mind stored in incredible abundance, faithful to every formula of art. Few would ever read those books, only the critic and the scholar, the student enamored of glorious prose.

Speed bade fair, through the major part of his work, to be a man for encyclopædias and literary textbooks. Then there was the other book, the last, that dropped into the lap of an unexpected world like a rich fruit, with preciousness conserved in it from flower to finish, dripping with the juice that has been long in perfecting. The student wondered at it, almost worshipped it. That was not so astonishing, considering it was the mature work of Speed who had been all his life trying to do fine things. The marvel was to come: that there was no man so ignorant as not to read it, laugh over it, cry over it. Why, Stayson sometimes thought, looking at the backs of the other books, conscious precisians in their row, if all Speed's stories had turned out like this, he would have been Shakespeare at the very least, or whatever domino passes now for Shakespeare. What was the secret of it? Nothing he could find in the record of Speed's life, or could by guess

read into it. The riddle kept his brows knitted by day and haunted him in sleep, and yet, after he had given his best strength to it for months while publishers were fretting, it stayed unsolved and the book was sent out in prime form, apparently, but so far as his own satisfaction went, a phantasm of incompleteness. Lacking the key of Speed's developed life, it was no life at all. There was the book now, a pile of it in the corner, while he sat at his table thinking,—irreproachable green volumes as self-sufficient in their outer promise as Speed's own first covers, and as lacking in a warm fulfilment.

He would think of it no more, he wearily decided for the hundredth time, this spring morning. It was one of his failures. Life, he austere prophesied, out of the knowingness of youth, would be full of them. Yet what he did let his mind drift into was just as unproductive, quite as lacking in any ease for him. Money, that was it. Loving the tasks he had

undertaken with the fevered impetuosity known only to those who see but one complexion to a deed, that of something to be done well, he still realized that appreciative publishers paid him very little compared with the resources of a market place that had such riches for exchange, as he saw it every day, and that he was poor. How long could he afford to be poor? How many years could he forego the delights of travel, the magnificent easement from care that might in the end, he believed, fit him out to be that prince of high inheritance, a writer of good prose? Every day he saw money in the making, looked on at the mad pageant of its spending: women made royal by the chance of an hour, glittering in jewels until the fair human integument of them lay in eclipse behind sheer light, saw dizzied, brainless Icarus in motor flight down the primrose path of youth, and hardfaced old men in that delicate jugglery of tossing coin from hand to hand, raking it

out of bad industrial conditions and showering it in a philanthropic flood on the soil made barren by that very industry. But the point of it was, there was so much of it. Pactolus had been found. Apparently any man strong enough to push through the defending scrub could put in his dipper, or even pipe it to his house. Then why not he, who wanted it to run into forms of art, to help make his "short life glorious, and leave a goodly tale"? Money, that was it. If he had that, all the rest would be added unto him.

This morning, his mind dwelling in a jaded way on the next job he was likely to undertake, he glanced about his workroom with an indifferent eye, and thought how well adapted it was to such rigorous purposes as his were likely to be, and how unwise it would seem to give it up, even if he should decide to go into the country for as long an interval as he could afford without access to libraries. He was not

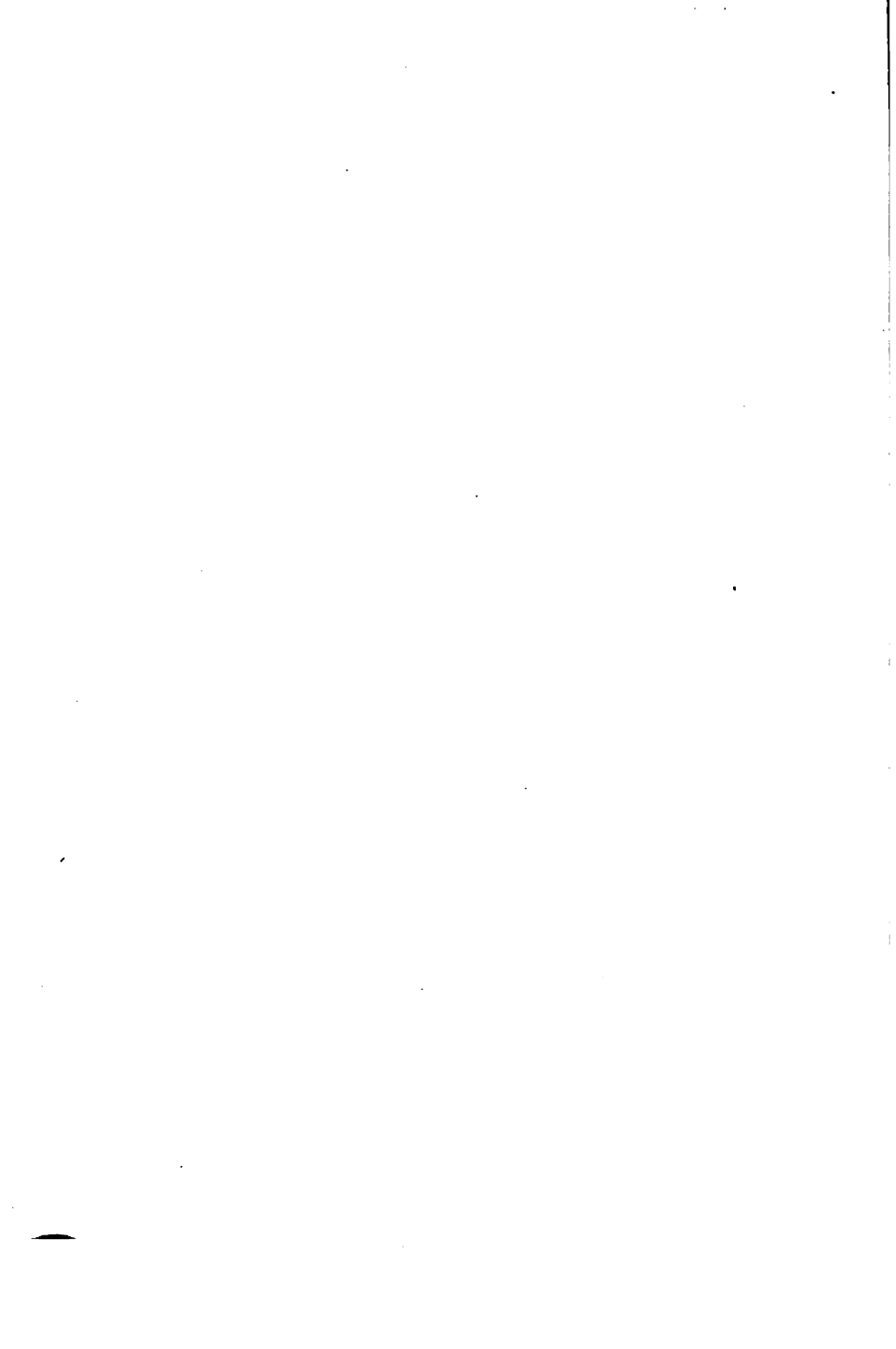
fond of his rooms, save from the habit of what has served us well. There were two: this he called his workroom, sombre but kindly in its ill-kept furniture, and the bedroom beyond, of an according ancientry, but overhung by the musty scent of rugs and coverings that have been long in use. He always tried to persuade himself into thinking that the mustiness was that of books: for after the crowding of his shelves proper, books were piled everywhere in corners thick with dust, on the window ledges and the top of an old sideboard that had found its decrepit way up here when the landlady, in an ungrounded dream of prosperity, had refurnished below, and there broken out into surfaces of cheerful oak. The wide low window commanded only chimney pots and a grudging sweep of sky; but it would serve. There was a plucky if ill-smelling ailanthus tree in a court below; and on a blizzard day when tugs were shrieking up and down invisible

waters, the snow made him a fairy city out of lacklustre windows and crazy roofs. His task lasted into nearly all the nights, and a few stars kept him intimate company. Also there were five chimney pots in a row; these always made him think of organ pipes, and their neighbor, a cowl in shape like an eccentric bird, a hard-working bird, at the beck of every breath, a dodo perhaps come back to justify his claim to live again by fulfilling the industrial conditions of modern being—this, he thought, was comedy. He fancied, as he looked out at them this morning, the spring green of ivy threads fretting the warm bricks, that a poem might be written about them sometime by one who had not merely the leisure but the vitality left for that inward surge and beat that go to the making of verse. But for him, stale from the completion of his task, he had not yet ceased to be merely a biographer, a dead man's dogging shadow.

As he looked about his room, in that questioning of the reasonableness of one's pursuits sprung out of the weariness of too long dwelling on an ended phase of them, there was a knock at the door, and a knock, as he had often tritely thought and did not that moment stop to reflect, is perhaps the most significant thing in life: the precursor of fortune or the herald of an omen now fulfilled. Or of course it may seem like other little rivets that hold together the framework of destiny, to mean nothing at all. Stayson thought it was the landlady and absently called, "Come in." No one answered, and presently, after the knock had been repeated, he rose and opened the door, as to a landlady too pertinacious, and saw there the incredible: a tall, well-standing young woman, who, though she might not be beautiful—he had time to wonder, in the pause of their according silence, whether there could be two opinions about that—was still noteworthy.



"HE ROSE AND OPENED THE DOOR AND SAW THERE THE INCREDIBLE"



She was chiefly, he decided, with that swift instinct of judgment his trade had taught him, wholesome, very particularly alive. The combination of too irregular a nose and a wavy mouth did her no actual damage in the counter fact that the mouth had exceptional teeth, ready to show themselves in a lovely line, and that her fresh-colored complexion, the red prompt to come and go, and a dotting accent of a few freckles, gave her an odd distinction. Her brows were well defined and delicate, and the eyes under them of the complex limpidity we call gray. Her hair had a flying beauty of light waviness inclined to be too heavy for symmetrical "doing up". She wore a dress somehow suggestive of spring, and there was a scent of flowers about her: not the townbred lady's considered perfume snatched from the latest Paris echo, but as if she had brushed a garden bed and its breath had lingered with her. This he thought, and smiled suddenly at

the fancy when his eyes caught the brown twig of apple blossoms at her belt, and he realized he had been up to his old tricks and gone afar to seek what the immediate accounted for abundantly. She answered the smile with an instant sympathy, and at that he felt a touch of indulgent kindness for her, she seemed so ready to be sweet. He wondered a little cynically out of his morning's mood of discontent, where such kindness usually led her.

"Good morning," she said.

He answered that, and she lifted her brows a very little in inquiry as to whether she was to be asked in. He saw there was no doubt in her mind that she had come to see him, and that he was Alaric Stayson.

"My uncle is down in the carriage," she offered, in a humility he saw no reason for. "I asked him to come up with me, but he wasn't quite able to."

That apparently accounted for the solitary

nature of her invasion, and Stayson wondered rapidly whether it was the part of tact to say he would go down to drag her uncle out of hiding; but he immediately decided, from something he read in her, that this was not the way it was expected to be, and opened the door wider.

"Won't you come in?" he asked.

She accepted instantly, and while she seated herself, with an unconscious air of looking no further than his work-table, he shut the bedroom door where a coverlet was trailing, and came back to his own chair. He did not wonder (for though she made a strong impression on him of one sort, it was not, in another, personally compelling) what notion she had of him in the ease of his working disarray; somehow her own personal note, clear as it was, had none of that temperamental challenge which might have made him recall his gaunt, large-featured face as he saw it in the glass that

morning and question if the thick hair he called sandy was too unpicturesquely tousled. But he did think ruefully of the mustiness in the room contrasted with her odor of the spring. He was afraid that, being a woman, she might know how bitterly the place needed a going-over, and he decided to speak to the landlady about it next day.

"You are Mr. Stayson, I know," the girl was saying, in her melodious, rather eager voice. "My name is Wickham, Adelaide Wickham." She seemed to expect that to make no significant impression on him, but added in haste, as if this were the critical fact, "Gilead Wickham was my father."

Though perhaps Alaric did not start at that, he did look at her with an augmented interest. Not to know Wickham was to have been ignorant of the most spectacular point in the moving financial pageant of the last twenty years. Wickham had made the perspective through

which the present operator in affairs looked back to crush or to denounce. He had colored the very atmosphere of America's prosperity. He had been the arbiter of the poor man's fate. The girl caught at once what Stayson saw in Wickham—those reams of journalistic columns, diatribes from union leaders and philanthropists, the small moving cosmos known as Wickham—and as if she could not bear to see him dwell upon it for a moment as it had been pictured, she came to her petition with a rush: "I want you to write his life."

Stayson did start a little at that, because it came so pat upon the heels of his discontent; this, he knew, judiciously managed, might mean money. But he put it from him, Wickham was so distasteful to him in what he believed he knew about him. How could he turn from the tablet of Speed's memory to a man to be unriddled from the tape? He laid his hand, a strong, complex hand, Adelaide Wickham had

time to note mechanically, on the pile of scattered papers before him, by their evidence to make his refusal the more kindly.

"It's very good of you," he said. "I'm honored to have you think of me like this, when you don't know me. But you see I'm too busy for a long time to come. Here's a lot of stuff unfinished."

She nodded, as if she had already considered that and pushed it well aside.

"Of course," she said, "I know you're busy. But Mr. Speed's biography is done."

His hand still lay upon the papers as if they were proof indubitable.

"Yes," he said, "but I'm clearing up now, taking account of stock. I may not do much for a while yet. I'm sick and tired of work. It's no joke to ticket a man like Speed. A biography's a kind of judgment, you know—awful business. When you've put the last stone on the pile, you wonder whether it isn't

going to tumble—whether it ought to, anyway.”

He was talking to her in an unconsidered fashion due, he felt, to his desire to shunt her off from her determined quest; yet his inner self, that sat in judgment on her, announced with emphasis that he might do so untrammelled. She could be trusted; she was of the class he characterized as “folks”. His last generality she did not meet at all, having apparently a set of arguments all ready and using them in course.

“The publisher’s announcement says you are the greatest living biographer,” she bade him note.

“Oh, well, publishers!”

He seemed to consign them to a limbo of affectionate toleration; but she sat still with her eloquent brows drawn together in their earnest querying, and considered what next to say. Stayson himself spoke again and with

more decision, anxious, not especially to have her go, though she did interrupt his work and he was rested now, but to announce definitely what he could not do. "It's awfully good of you. It makes me feel quite set up to have you offer me a job like that."

She was considering him, he saw, what arguments would reach him, and suddenly, unreasonably, for she did not suggest feminine wiles so much as the hardihood of a healthy boy, her eyes filled with tears.

"Don't!" Stayson said involuntarily. "Don't do that!"

But she had not heard him. She brought out the one argument she might not have meant to use, but here it came from the inmost treasury of her thought where, he saw, she must have brooded and suffered in secret.

"Nobody ever really knew my father."

"That's likely," said Alaric blunderingly, remembering what the consensus of the world

thought it knew about Wickham. "It's awfully hard to know anybody, isn't it? And when it comes to putting 'em into a picture—well, sometimes I think I never'll do it again—even if I get a chance."

He smiled brightly at her, leading her, as she patiently knew, having herself so often followed this interview in all its imagined phases, away from her desired goal. But the sun was on it; from some crystalline certainty it struck out a gleam.

"You would know," she said humbly. "It wouldn't take much trouble. You'd see at once."

Stayson stared at her now in an arrested interest. Was this a new and subtler mode of flattery, or did she really believe in him to such an irrational extent?

"What makes you think I'd know?" he enquired plainly.

But the pleading eyes did not intermit their

gaze. If she was using all her batteries to influence him, at least she was willing he should see what guns she had.

"I've read the life of Senator Reynolds," she answered, for sufficient argument.

"That's nothing. Everybody knew Reynolds. Everybody could. The whole thing was on the surface, clear as a bell."

That was an awkward implication, he realized. Everything was not on the surface with Wickham. Everything was not clear as a bell.

She was hanging to her point.

"You'd know my father," she was immovably insisting. "You'd see what the others never have seen."

"What others?" he asked her.

"All of them," she answered vaguely, "the newspapers, everybody."

He was smiling upon her warmly, glad she had such sustaining memories.

"You want everybody to see him as you

did," he said confirmingly; but she gave a sad little negative shake of the head.

"No," she said. "I didn't see it. But you would."

Stayson stared at her a second, and then burst out into brief embarrassed laughter.

"Why, how obstinate you are," he cried. "You expect me to take somebody I never saw and know more about him in six months or so than his intimates, his family even. You're unreasonable."

But she was looking at him in a mild candor that sat beguilingly upon her.

"My father was kind," she said, following back over some path she had traced to puzzling conclusions, "very kind. But he was a man of business. That was the side of him other people knew."

"Of course. It's better so, too. We can't expect anybody but our nearest to know us really, and they don't come within gunshot of it."

She paused a moment in the silence of anxious thought; but then she looked up at him with a new assurance.

"Well," she said, "after your life of Reynolds, you'd find it hard to persuade me you didn't know the way to get at people."

"But, bless you! I told you Reynolds was an easy proposition. His outlines were all defined. Everybody had a perfectly clear idea of him. I suppose I only took the composite photograph."

"But didn't everybody have a clear idea of my father?"

"Why, yes, I suppose so, in a way," he conceded awkwardly. "But people differ so." That last, he saw, she found too foolish to be answered, and he hastened to add, out of a specious, simulated interest, to prevent her from really knowing how clumsily he was putting her off, "I suppose you have lots of documentary evidence—letters and all that?"

She shook her head, with not much comprehension that it really made any difference.

"No. I haven't a thing. There are business records, of course. Still, not many, considering how wide his interests were. There are really no personal letters at all. He never kept them."

"There, you see!" He was smiling at her good-humoredly, now that she herself had shown him the way out. "You haven't a speck of material. How am I going to write a biography without data?"

She was looking at him with that bright confident gaze he had seemed to claim of her from the first.

"You'd know," she said simply. "You'd know just how."

Stayson looked at her a moment, a slow, unwilling smile coming upon his face. He felt most like getting up, putting his hands in his pockets and perhaps striding across the room to snatch a sustaining and argumentative in-

spiration from the chimney pots. He found himself speaking to her then as if she were an old acquaintance, whose due might be a kind familiarity.

"If you're not the most obstinate person!"

She, too, laughed, and they gave each other the glance of understanding.

"Well, I suppose you'll be asking me to think it over," he said then. "That's the next step with people like you who won't take no for an answer."

"Oh, no," she returned as lightly, yet, he could see with a meaning she meant to make sure of carrying, "that would give you a loophole. You'd promise to think it over, and then in a week or so I should get a letter saying you'd thought and you really couldn't."

"So I can't," he hastened to throw in.

"That's why," she continued, with her direct gaze still upon him, "why I want you to answer today."

"But you won't take no?"

"I can't take no."

Her eyes besought him to forgive her the arrogance of that.

"But it can't be yes!" His own position began to seem absurd to him. "It makes me look an awful ass," he added, out of an irritated sense of his coyness, "sitting here and being persuaded to a job lots of other fellows would give ducats for. I ought to be enormously flattered. I am. I assure you I am. But I've got all kinds of plans in my head, and this would interfere. I simply don't see my way to it."

She rose then, and stood looking thoughtfully down, her frank, almost boyish face changed by its dropped lids into the serene majesty of an older, perhaps a more maternal woman. She was giving it up, he saw, this plan so mysteriously important to her, and with a good deal of pain. He hated to deny people, hated to see

them balked of what they had set that current of warm life called desire so palpably upon. But while he was chafing against the fortune that had made him the agent of her defeat, and wondering how he could tell her that Wickham's life wasn't worth writing at all, her face was suddenly all of a glow. The color ran into it, and the mobile mouth began to smile. She looked up at him, and her eyes, too, were smiling.

"I can't," she said, as if she knew the absurdity of her own position. "I just can't bear to give it up."

They laughed together.

"Well," said Stayson, "I can't, either. I never was so flattered before, and likely I never shall be again. I wish I could always work for a taskmaster that thinks as well of my stuff as you do; but there aren't minutes enough in the day. If I could 'write with a pen in each hand', you'd see where I'd come out!" He

was amplifying his gratitude and the inevitableness of his refusing, in that wildly generous fashion we follow when we see our way to escape. A little personal curiosity of his own put up its head here, and suggested that it might easily be satisfied. "You spoke of Reynolds' life," he ventured. "You haven't read Speed's?"

"Oh, yes," she answered instantly, yet unwillingly, he thought. "I finished it last night."

"But you don't use that as an argument for my fitness for your task. You don't like it."

"Oh, yes." Her eyes met his with a bright candor in them. "I think it's splendid."

"No, you don't really like it—not so well as Reynolds'."

"I think it is beautifully written."

He made a little motion of the hand; it negatived this as argument.

"That's it. All the subjects and predicates agree, all the adjectives pertain. It sounds pretty. But you don't like it."

"I do. I tell you I do—truly."

"Not so well as Reynolds'?"

"Oh, well, you make us see Reynolds, you make us understand him."

"And you don't understand Speed?"

"At first perhaps—up to—"

She stopped and he supplied it.

"Up to writing that last book. Well," he said, when her clear gaze confirmed it, "no more did I. I didn't understand him either—after that."

"But—" there was going to be consolation in her rapid speech, he thought, and his chagrin would not let him hear it. After all, in spite of this queer guise she wore of long acquaintanceship, his trust in her was not an hour old. Let him soften his refusal of her errand and in a fashion bid her go; and then he bethought himself he might gild their concluded interview by letting her into something she had a personal connection with, though at second hand, and

perhaps take her mind still more completely from the obsessing idea. It would at least give a friendly ground to say good-bye on.

"If you really wanted me to do it as much as I like to think," he said, "being a vain chap and not much used to praise, you almost had a bribe in your hand a few months ago. You could have said to me then, 'I know where there's something you want, and maybe I could get it for you.'"

Her face settled into a grave intentness, and the eyes grew thoughtful, not with too keen a light, but just the quick recognition of possibilities she still might grasp. He wondered whether she had perhaps inherited her father's extraordinary acumen and power of foreseeing combinations which had made him the champion player of his magnificent and sordid game.

"What have I that you'd like?" she asked directly.

"Oh, you didn't really have it, but you might

have had. And if you had, you could have waved it over my head and made me bark for it."

He guessed that if she hadn't it, with the true business instinct she was going to see if she hadn't something like it.

"Isn't Morton Wickham your uncle?"

"Yes." She nodded toward the street, and Stayson concluded that this was the uncle who was down there in the carriage. He saw that she was, in a way, sufficiently chaperoned, and he wondered if old Morton, who had shared her father's fortunes, had also this overmastering desire to see the dead financier in print.

"He didn't know till we got here what it was I wanted to ask you," she said briefly. "I told him as we were driving along. Then he said he wouldn't come up. He often can't do things. He's very nervous."

"Won't you sit down again?" Stayson asked her. "This is really rather interesting, though

it doesn't pertain to a thing we are saying. I mean it's interesting that I had something to ask of one of your people, and now you've asked something of me. And neither of us could do it for the other. Mine's a closed issue, an *impasse*. It had to do with Speed's biography. I found among his letters three from a woman: charming letters. She signed her first name, Adelaide. And in one of them were some hints that led me to think she was Mrs. Morton Wickham."

"Aunt Adelaide?" She regarded him in a frank surprise. "What was she writing to him for?"

"That was the exciting part of it. They must have known each other rather well, because, as I say, she signed her first name, and more than that, she seemed to depend on him for advice, counsel, sympathy. I don't mean sympathy in any sentimental sense. The letters were the most direct, straightforward ones you

could imagine. And what she was writing to him about was evidently a thing extraordinarily interesting to her, and it was a perfect mystery to me. She called it Robin Hood's Barn."

"Robin Hood's Barn! What did she mean by that?"

"I don't know."

"Did uncle know? Did you ask him?"

"Oh, yes, I asked him, and through a business friend whom he might have wished to please; of course I asked him like lightning, it seemed so important somehow. Seemed as if it might have been one of the vital things in Speed's life. But he didn't know."

"He didn't know!" She had drawn her brows together, and he guessed at once, with a quickened heartbeat of his own, seeing some possible late dovetailing of his loose bits of work, that a doubt invaded her—a doubt gathered from her previous knowledge of him—whether uncle did not know. She drew in these feelers

at possibility then, and returned to the more immediate issue.

"But what does it mean, in general, that is?" she speculated. "Robin Hood's Barn? I've heard it used, I've used it myself; but what does it mean?"

He had been there before her and could answer concisely.

"A long way round, I should say."

"What did Aunt Adelaide say about it?"

"She referred to it, as a phrase, very casually, but quite evidently as something they both understood, and were accustomed to talk about. He, I should say, was making plans for it. He knew exactly what she meant and approved of her having it as she liked. It wasn't a small scheme. It was a big one, of some sort, and he was helping her carry it through."

"But why was he? If it was something she wanted, why didn't she go to uncle?"

"I don't know." He looked at her thinking

how luxuriant her eyelashes were, and she, pondering, stared at the ground. "What kinds of things did Mrs. Wickham seem likely to want?" he ventured. "Buildings? real estate?"

"That's what I was thinking." She flashed a glance up at him. "I never asked myself that about her; but now I do ask, I should say, nothing. She was the quietest person. She lived plainly, she didn't entertain. Why, if I had looked about to give Aunt Adelaide her soul's desire, I shouldn't have known what it was."

"That's the queer part of it," said Stayson. "That Speed should know. And he did."

"Did it seem to be something he wanted, too?"

"Oh, yes. He really wanted it tremendously. But I can't say it was for himself. Maybe he wanted it for her, because she cared so much."

"But that would be absurd. He couldn't have cared so much himself unless—" She

stopped there, but he read the trite conclusion as it went beating on in her mind, "unless he had been in love with her." "And it's impossible," she continued, in another form. "Aunt Adelaide wasn't that kind of person."

He was not sure which of several possibilities she might mean here: whether Aunt Adelaide was not a person to be fallen in love with, or whether she could not have felt a desire so strongly as to dominate a man of Speed's demanding type.

"What was she like?" he ventured.

She paused to consider with that intent expression of the face, the giving all to the subject of the moment, which was, he already knew, so charming of her.

"Why, I don't think I could quite say, on the spot," she debated. "You see she wasn't a person you'd think of at all: I shouldn't, that is. But maybe that was because I was younger, or because she never demanded anything for her-

self. Yes, that was it," she announced, with an air of summing up. "She never asked anything for herself; so of course nobody gave her anything."

This she added quite simply, as an assured fact, not implying any advantage of worldly wisdom on her part, but as elementary as hunger.

"What type was she?" he continued, perhaps not out of any impertinent catechism of Aunt Adelaide, but because the moment interested him, as one who loved to put things down in books. And he liked the way the girl talked, the clearness of it, the simple habit of her deduction, as of one who was accustomed to think matters out and depend on her own upshot.

"How did she look?" she answered him. "That's the first thing, isn't it? She was tall and spare, not slender exactly but with a kind of emaciation that wasn't unwholesome in any way, but as if perhaps she fasted, as if she

didn't care so very much about being plump and round, and so she wasn't."

"I see."

In her mind, he saw, also, the emaciation counted for something. It was the mark of an inward habit. She continued:

"Aunt Adelaide had light hair, very fine, rather thin, and I suppose she had blue eyes. I remember now she looked down a good deal. I hadn't thought about her eyes."

"I had an idea Speed never saw her," he put in. "Something in one of the letters made it seem as if they hadn't met and perhaps didn't want to, as if they were keeping it—" There he broke off and winked his eyes open, as if to dispel some mood that had taken too firm hold of him. He laughed outright at himself. "Do you know," he owned, "I believe I made that up. I don't really think there was a thing in the letters to make me see they didn't want to meet. Somehow the idea of it struck me for

the first time. No, I'm sure they never mentioned it. But I could swear they hadn't met when those letters were written, and they'd known each other a long time."

"No," she said, "I don't believe they had met. I wasn't very old—very much grown up—when she died, but if he'd been at their house I should have known it. They were quite near us, you see. And I should have remembered it especially because they had no guests of any sort. There was never company in that house, never!" She seemed to change her point of attack and added brightly, almost defiantly, as if she knew how hard uncle was to be swayed: "I'm going to ask him about those letters myself. I'm going to see if he has them."

"Oh, but he hasn't. He wrote me so, distinctly."

She mused a moment, not on that apparently, which seemed to carry no weight for her, but on some branching interest of her own.

"Uncle is very nervous," she said absently. Then she looked up at him with a certain direct challenging. "I wish you'd let me invite you down to Brookford, to spend a few days with uncle and me."

He was moved by her kindness: for that it was absolute kindness he had no doubt. He felt that her own petition to him had retired to the background. She was not merely holding it in reserve for a more propitious time, but was really not thinking of it; and yet, so generous was she in her sane appreciation of the way people ought to help along by doing the obvious lifting at the sagging end of the load, that he could not feel egotistical in accepting that point of view. It was all too impersonal.

Her thought, too, followed on his, step by step.

"I'm not going to ask you to do what I wanted," she assured him. "I just want to know, for my own sake, too, somehow, about those letters. Won't you come?"

"You're awfully good," he began.

"We live very simply," she broke in. "You won't have any proper amusements, tennis or golf or big dinner parties. Uncle lives in my house and he likes a quiet life. He's very nervous."

"I should be delighted to come."

"That's nice." She rose with the air of really going now. "Why, it seems as if you'd have to. Haven't you got to know everything about Speed?"

"I want to, most infernally."

"Of course. The biography may be finished—yes, I know, it *is* finished; but if there's any more to say you could tuck it in somewhere afterward. In other editions, I mean, months after this, years after, if you liked." He saw she had a great idea of the ease of doing whatever she saw was good to be done. "If there aren't any letters, maybe uncle could tell us why there ever had been any. Are you coming

down to the carriage with me?" He was already at the landing, wearing the air of an appropriate and deferential courtesy. "Then you can meet uncle," she continued, while he followed her.

When they came out on the narrow sidewalk where a man with a multitude of instruments combined was playing them with foot and hand, and children, half clad, but all a grace of buoyant motion, were waltzing to the last cheap melody, Stayson saw with surprise that the carriage was a timeworn hack, and not the shining equipage he might have expected the daughter of old Wickham to support. She advanced to it with an air of readiness to greet some one within, and Stayson opened the door for her. There she paused. The carriage was empty. Then the coachman turned about and gave the message that had been entrusted to him. The gentleman had gone on to the oculist. He would meet her there.

"Well!" She thought a moment and then

said with her air of businesslike directness: "Will you come down next Wednesday, on the 3.30? Brookford, you know. Can you come for four days?"

"You're very good," he assured her. "Of course I'll come, and jump at it. I can't tell you how awfully good you are."

"Don't try!" She was in the carriage now, smiling at him in a frank reminder and recognition of their new common interest. "Wednesday, then. Good-bye."

But as the carriage was about to start, he put his hand on the window and said impulsively:

"I must look an awful bounder not to do the thing you asked me to."

"No! no! I'm not thinking of that any more. Truly I'm not. It was foolish perhaps. Only I wanted to have people see my father as he was, and I knew you'd know just what he was. But we won't think of that. Good-bye."



"STAYSON STOOD LOOKING AFTER THE CARRIAGE WHILE THE WALTZ
SURGED ABOUT HIM"



Stayson stood looking after the carriage while the waltz surged about him and one small smeared couple fell against his legs.

"I know what you wanted," he said aloud, addressing the girl in the carriage now turning the corner up the hill. "You wanted him rehabilitated, if he had one chance—one small chance. It's a damned shame!"



CHAPTER II



II

THE afternoon that Stayson went down to Brookford, the time seemed meant for journeying and spring festas. In those few days even, the trees had leaped into green and he, used for so many months now to the city's way of taking things, felt the beauty of it overwhelmingly. It seemed to call him to more vivid issues than the routine of his desk, though he might even have been serving the highest ambition there: as if no man could afford to ignore the bourgeoning of the earth for any mandate less imperative than that of the earth herself. At the little station of Brookford, set in ample fields rising to the west in a line of mountains near enough to give the fretwork of firs against the sky, he looked about for the Wickhams' carriage, again expecting to find a correct or even pretentious

equipage, and saw only the stereotyped village hack and a collarless driver in a state of cordial receptiveness, informing him that Miss Adelaide expected him. So Stayson settled himself on the dehiscent cushions, took off his hat and opened both windows to the day, putting his head out even, to filch every glimpse of the budding time. His drive led him through the one village street, with its store and post-office combined where men in overalls and girls from school "out" near by, were assembling for the mail his train had brought, to a country road suddenly magnificent under elms, and so on for three miles into an enclosure whereof he could not see the bounds, but rich in trees like a splendid park. Here was no sophisticated lawn. Herd's-grass and clover had already begun an unhindered growth, and were evidently not to be touched until the mowing time in June: for if it were cut now, even within a week, there would be stubble.

Stayson drew a long breath here. He liked abundance. It had been one of his sayings, wilfully conceived to top another man's temperance, that he never liked anything unless he could have too much of it. There was not too much of this. There never could be too much of summer, and there lay no abyss of surfeit, he knew, on the other side of nature's affluence; but it had the air of being enough not only for him and the birds, ecstatically lovemaking with the exigency of those who want to get the preliminary promises over because there are so many straws and feathers and all the rest of autumn's bankrupt stock for nests, but all created things. That was the wonder of spring, he thought, and so on into June. It seems to wave the banner of plenty like a heaven descended chariot in Egypt's famine, and drunkenly declare it can feed not only the life reasonably belonging to an area but all the army you might bring to camp upon it. It is like

youth. Thereupon he laughed, remembering he was moralizing like a man twice his years, and that he, also, had youth. With him, too, the year was at the spring, and all the cups from which he could conceive himself as longing to drink, looked full. All but that of money, which he at once abjured the thought of, as a matter of good taste, in these surroundings, and that of love; and for this last he felt no spasm of concern. He had no time for its disquieting procession of emotions tricked out by nature in all forms of unreality, and ending in some frenzied Bacchic dance, to leave behind it confusion, if not ruin. He had his own ideas about it as about other sorceries, and it seemed to him to hold an odious advantage over the unready mind, with its way of making everything appear like something else, until one awakens from moon madness to the light of day and sees a rose, fair, indeed, but yet a rose and not a flower of paradise. He meant to elude

the spell of it until perhaps at thirty-six, when life and he were older comrades, he might like to settle down with a smooth-browed, kindly mate, not too exacting nor too beguiling even, but irreproachable, and the stuff that wears.

He came out of his spring dream suddenly, smiling to think, after all, his subject matter was one with the song of the birds, though they were in such tumultuous haste to mate; then he saw, farther up the hill, the house itself, a magnificent square pile in ancient grandeur, with a colony of buildings behind it at exactly the right point to augment its sumptuous ease. But just as he saw himself being driven up to the long vista of steps and Adelaide Wickham coming down to meet him, frank and kindly, with perhaps uncle behind her (uncle, no doubt, "very nervous") the horses turned into a driveway branching from the main one and took a down grade between charming groves of birch and larches just breaking into green. Here,

the birds assured him, they never did see the world so perfectly splendid and so entirely suited to mating, as well as so utterly to be depended on to keep exactly like this always, and to have got over any tendency to that catalepsy that used to be called winter. Just about the moment that he was agreeing with them in an unspoken but rhapsodical concurrence of his own, the carriage rounded another sweep, a more modest one on a level, as if it hardly expected itself to come out on anything so grand as a terraced elevation, and a second house, older than the manor, and with a surface of gray shingle, came into view. This also was large in a modest way. It had the effect of the parent house on a place which had later afforded to build more magnificently.

Here the man drew up before the broad, low veranda, budding out in vines, and Adelaide Wickham, standing there full of affairs, as he could see, and with no implication of an es-

pecial waiting, came forward, somewhat as he had pictured, to meet him. Yet the vision of her was more of a workaday complexion than he had conceived it. Very fresh-looking she was in some sort of blue linen, and with a blue apron of the shade artists love, that came nearly to her throat. Stayson was so used to the company of women dressed for work, of one sort or another, and the frank sanity of that intercourse, that he found nothing to question until afterward in her unadorned simplicity; then, when he did remember it as a little picture, a part of the fresh spring day, he found himself wondering idly at finding a millionaire's daughter so habited.

"I'm so glad to see you," she said, giving him her hand. "Isn't it a nice clean day? I never saw the country looking better."

"I feel as if I had never seen it at all," said Stayson. "I've had an intemperate kind of living in the city for such a long stretch, last

summer, last winter, this spring. The minute I saw your larches back there, I knew what a fool I'd been."

A stout maid in spectacles had appeared, and started with his bag upstairs.

"Wait, a minute, Mary," her mistress was calling after her. "Show Mr. Stayson his room. Will you go up," she asked him, "or sit down here on the veranda with me?"

As Mary was waiting for him, he concluded he would go up, though so kind a day made even a railway journey no special ordeal to suggest rehabilitation. In his room, he looked about him with a sense of peace and a recognition of the stability of things. None of the furniture was imposing, but it was heavy and old. There were light muslin curtains at the windows, and backing them, flowered chintz. He was glad there was no nosegay on the table to be evaded while he was shaving, but he was equally glad that the scent of all the flowers in

Christendom came in at the window. There was also a fresh, good smell, familiar and of the earth. What was it? He looked out of the window, and laughed aloud. Ploughing, that was all it was. No wonder it smelled of the earth. It was the earth itself. He was a country boy and had held the plough. He knew.

When he went down, Adelaide was on the veranda, though still, it seemed, not in reference to him. An old man, bent but wiry, with a lean sun-dried face and no pretense of looking at her or answering, but doing exactly as she bade him, stood on the grass below her at the end of the steps, sorting out sticks for staking plants.

"All the ten foot ones together, Jim," she was saying. "Then all the eights and fours. I want 'em all painted. You'll find that dark green in the paint closet. But keep the sizes together when you put 'em away. I abominate trying to carry stakes, when I'm tying up

my larkspur," she said to Stayson, as he came forward to the rail, "and having some of the pesky little ones drop out."

"So you tie up your own larkspur."

"I should think I did! I tie it up, and after the first wind storm I put splints on the stalks that are twisted, and worship it all the time."

"What does the gardener say? Doesn't he call you down?"

"That's all right. We haven't any gardener."

If he had known nothing about her worldly status, he need not have commented on this; but old Wickham's fortune was an open book. So he responded with no hesitation:

"Not on this big place?"

She shook her head.

"My uncle doesn't take much stock in gardeners. He prefers to live simply."

"But there must be acres upon acres. The grass alone—"

"Oh, men come for that. But it's servants



"CATHIE GOODWIN CAME UP THE PATH AT A GOOD PACE"



he doesn't like—a retinue. There's Cathie Goodwin. I'm glad. She'll stay to supper."

That sounded too much like more girl in the constituent of his afternoon, and more talk and flutter. There was no flutter about Miss Wickham, and perhaps that was why he was so soon on the frankest of terms with her. He was sorry, he thought, with a little of the irritability of the exile who, having returned, had selfishly expected the country to be all for him. But as Cathie Goodwin came up the path at a good pace, he decided she was not a girl because she had white hair, and then again, at nearer range, that she was, because her complexion looked as fine as velvet and her cheeks were pink. She was not very tall, but she was extremely vigorous and walked easily, and she, too, fitted the spring because her dress was white, and she carried a parasol lined with a delicious green.

"I had to come at once," she said to Stayson, when they had professed themselves appro-

privately glad to meet, "to find out who you were. I'm so relieved you're here. I was afraid you wouldn't be."

"That's so kind of you," Stayson was saying stupidly when she broke in:

"Oh, you see this is the first house, and if you hadn't been here, I should have had to go on. I should have gone to every house on the road till I'd found out."

"We're country neighbors," Adelaide explained to him, "all of us. We're very curious."

"You didn't tell me he was coming," this young-old Cathie was reproaching her.

Stayson found himself wondering now, with an interest actual and unashamed, how old she was. There was such an expression of flowering candor in her face, such a frank recognition that everything was exceedingly curious and everybody would be the better for knowing everything, that he felt quite sure she would toss her age at him like a pretty throw in the

game of life, and only ask him to fling his back in turn.

"I thought you'd get more out of it if you just saw a stranger driving by," Adelaide assured her lightly; but Stayson immediately felt this was not the reason, and the next query made it more apparent.

"What does uncle say?" Cathie was asking ruthlessly.

"Uncle? what about?"

"Your having company."

"Oh, uncle doesn't say much."

Then Stayson guessed that his coming had to be broken to uncle, and that Adelaide might not, for that reason, have found it best to share the fact with a too-voluble Cathie. For an instant he wished he had not come. Then his spirits danced a little, gleefully, with another thought of the speckless day, and he was glad he had. Uncle might well prove a fortress to be stormed; but if this was part of the scot he

owed for his salt, he would bring up his forces presently, when uncle should appear, and hammer away. Cathie, invited to stay to supper, accepted at once with no pretense of demur, only conjecturing that mother would know where she was. That gave Stayson one more point in chronology. At least she was not too old to have a mother still extant.

All the afternoon until the six o'clock supper they sat there together, and Stayson was more and more enlivened by the exuberance of Cathie's confidences and the irresponsible candor of her mind. It seemed as if she were telling everything she knew, and yet afterward, when he thought it over, he could not remember that she had told anything at all. He wondered, in that later commentary, if her volubility might be the species of armor she elected to wear. Some people, he knew, take refuge in taciturnity to hide their sacred or timid selves. Another doubles and tacks in the con-

versational pursuit. Cathie simply showed you her hand at once, and it was only long after that you discovered she had had the other cards—the only ones that counted—up her sleeve.

Mary called them to supper in a self-respecting and not very conventional way, and when they went into the cool dining room with its grape-shaded window to the east, Morton Wickham was waiting for them,—or not for them, because he seemed to find no manner of interest in them except as a part of the machinery which would cause other machinery, the necessary ceremonial of eating, to begin.

“Does your heart leap up when you behold the famous Morton Wickham?” Cathie said heedlessly, as they crossed the hall to the dining room. “Now don’t be shocked. He’s not your host. He doesn’t even know you’re coming, I bet a filbert. Adelaide’s your hostess. I haven’t said a thing about her, have I?”

Then Morton Wickham, recalled from the brown study where he stood, his hand upon his chair back, looked up as if startled a little when Adelaide's mention of their guest bade him note that a stranger was present, and Stayson looked full into his thin, melancholy face with the sad eyes retreated, almost from the possibility of encountering another gaze. Yet melancholy was not the word. That was too gentle, too full of soft twilight longings and old regrets. He was not so much saddened as dried out of full existence. All the lines in his yellowed face led downward. His moustache drooped. His nose had a long meagreness, and his eyes slanted slightly at the corners. He was most evidently disconcerted before the guest, but greeted him civilly enough, and they all sat down.

"I didn't think you'd appear at supper, Mr. Wickham," said Cathie, in her persistent showering of an unconsidered cheer. "I thought you'd seen me coming along the walk."

He looked up courteously, with an air of deferential listening.

"I hadn't seen you," he said gravely.

"No, that's what I mean. Do you notice I always speak loudly to you, Mr. Wickham? I do. Have you noticed it?"

"No," said he, with the same implication of endurance. "I hadn't noticed it."

"Well, I do. It's exactly as if I thought you were deaf. But I don't think so."

"There is no reason why you should think me hard of hearing."

His quietude might have implied that he held himself to the task of answering an almost invisible creature who, but for the piping note God had mysteriously given her, might have been non-existent, so far as he was concerned.

"That's exactly it," said Cathie, arranging her plate with composure. "But I do scream at you. Sometimes I perfectly yell. I know the reason. I figured it out the other day. It's

because you're off somewhere, thinking out things, and I feel as if I had to hail you, to bring you back. Ship ahoy! that's what I sing out. Ship ahoy!"

At that he did look at her a moment, his brows drawn together in a puzzled stare of arrested interest, and Stayson thought of the succinct phrase that really covered what she dared imply. He was not "all there", Cathie had virtually told him, and Stayson wondered if, in a way, it could be true. But he was beginning to see through her bluff fusillade of personal attack and vagary to the certainty that she was really a gentlewoman, and that if Wickham were not, in her sense, "all there", she would never have divulged it.

Then, as Wickham began to use his fork, Stayson noticed something else about him. He wore gloves, thin silk gloves of a light gray. Momentary and unconsidered as Stayson's glance at them had been, Wickham, perhaps

anticipating something of the sort, had caught it, and made his first voluntary speech. But it was addressed to Adelaide.

"I find this is a day when things are very disagreeable to the touch."

Cathie supplied an instant commentary.

"You just hate to touch some things, don't you, Mr. Wickham? I don't blame you. But I should think you'd loathe silk gloves. They make me crawl."

He answered her very seriously.

"It is not rough things merely, or things that are hot or cold. It is the way things feel on certain days."

"Is it always the same kind of a day?" Cathie asked him, out of her abounding readiness.

"Can you tell when it's going to be?"

"No, I should find it impossible to tell when it is going to be. But I find gloves a great protection."

Here Stayson, stupidly as he thought after-

ward, as if he must feel bound to give a reason, put in his word.

"I've heard of that antipathy, Mr. Wickham, in people who are, for some reason, nervously tired. It's the nerves near the surface, I suppose, a peculiar sensitiveness. It must be awfully trying."

Wickham felt, it was plain, irritation of another sort, for he looked up rather sharply and said, speaking now to Stayson for the first time directly, —

"That's what the doctor said. It's a foolish thing to say. I've had it, and I ought to know. It is merely that on certain days surfaces feel different to the touch. It may be the temperature or the humidity or the magnetic currents of the air. At any rate, things feel different, and it's very hard indeed to come in contact with them. You wouldn't like to hold a red-hot poker, would you? There's no particular pleasure in touching a block of ice or a burr?"

He was out of breath when, in a futile anger, he had finished, and Stayson, seeing Adelaide regard him with concern, felt that even so mild a passion was unusual in him. For himself, he saw that the only thing incumbent on him was to make a disclaimer of sweeping dimensions.

"I certainly don't care about being roughed up," he answered. "If I had my way, I'd have the world covered with velvet."

"That's it," said Wickham, "velvet."

Then he withdrew again to his own thoughts.

But Cathie had not done with the subject or its sequence.

"Speaking of velvet, Adelaide," she said, "should you think, if I parted my hair and did it in a pug, and wore a little close black bonnet, my general usefulness would be increased?"

"I don't see any reason for it," Adelaide returned gravely, it evidently being their custom to play together.

"You will when I tell you. Old ladies are out of fashion. They're all massaging themselves now and dressing as young! my goodness! before we know it, they'll be in dotted muslin and ankle-ties."

"There isn't any age now," said Stayson tritely.

"That's it. And we've got accustomed to it. We need it, as they say, in our business. Rufus says that, Adelaide. Rufus is my nephew," she tossed at Stayson. "He comes home from Tech and brings the queerest talk with him—slang—splendid."

"Your mother dresses like an old lady," said Adelaide prettily. "She's beautiful."

"I should think she was. Well, I'm going to dress that way myself, and then there'll be two old ladies in the house. Do you know how I got my idea? Mrs. Capen Barstow—she lost her husband last month, Mr. Stayson (lost! isn't that a ridiculous way to put it, if you're

evangelical and the things they said at the funeral are true?) she came in to talk with mother, and I found her on the floor, her head on mother's shoulder. Right on her shoulder. It looked awfully sweet."

"I'd like to put my head on your mother's shoulder 'most any day," said Adelaide.

"That's it. So you would. So would anybody. And if you're in trouble! My! I began to think I'd get me a little triangle of a lace cap right off."

"The outward furnishings aren't everything; I suppose you know," Stayson reminded her. "I've seen a picture of a kitten with a mob cap on her head."

"So have I. But isn't that sweet of you! A kitten. I'm kittenish, Adelaide. I remind him of a kitten. I don't know whether that's altogether a compliment. But I've got it into my head I should be more of a plum, so to speak, when I go round neighboring,

if I carried a cap-box and wore prunella shoes."

"Miss Goodwin does a lot of neighboring," Adelaide explained. "She reads to old ladies and teaches young ones how to wash the baby. She's the good angel about here."

"Meddler, that's what I am," Cathie supplied. "Love to get into houses, love to see how folks live, just love to have 'em ask me what I'd do if I were in their places. Know perfectly well I couldn't tell if I were, you see, but always tell right off when I'm not. Mr. Stayson, do you know what prunella is?"

"Haven't the ghost of an idea," Stayson replied, realizing at once, having caught the habit of her, that he'd got to leap back into the middle of her previous discourse to find any sequence at all. "I fancied it was a sort of leather."

"Is it? I thought it was shoes with elastic let in at the sides. They go with white stockings. Mother wears 'em; says her own mother did,

and she guesses she isn't going to lace up boots at her time of life. She won't speak through the telephone either. Mother's dear!"

When they went out on the veranda after tea, Adelaide slipped her hand through her uncle's arm and, with a gentle compulsion, took him also.

"Just a little while," Stayson heard her say. "Just a breath. The air's very sweet."

But he pulled his chair to a point definitely removed from them all and sat there, his gloved hands lifted slightly from the chair-arms, as if, even through a covering fabric, he could not bear to touch their surface. Presently Adelaide, having seated herself at his left, got up and took another chair to the right of his and quite near, so including him the more nearly in their company.

"It is an unusually bad night for surfaces," he announced again. "Don't you find it a bad night, sir?"

To Stayson, this seemed undoubted mania,

and he was about to concur, out of a theory, freshly conceived in the small emergency, that the insane must be indulged. But Adelaide put in quickly, almost from a newly sprung resentment, he thought, as if she bade him take heed that her uncle was by no means to be humored foolishly:

"We don't feel it as you do, uncle. Sometimes your hands are more sensitive than at others. That's all."

"It's enough," said Wickham. "It's enough."

Here Cathie began her darting discursiveness, which served so admirably to fill up intervals in a world where it is understood that when people are gathered together there must be talk without cessation. In the early evening she took her leave, having first besought Wickham to walk a few steps with her, on the heels of rejecting Stayson's evident intention of taking her the entire way. From the manner of her persuasion of Wickham, Stayson could see

that she was in the conspiracy of which Adelaide was chief, to incite him to a little motion, a breath of air, the smallest amount even of wholesome change. They went down the path together, and Stayson noted that Wickham walked like an old man and feeble. His back was frail, his legs bent at the knee, and in his shabby clothes he had the look of some forlorn pensioner. They were hardly out of hearing when Adelaide turned, with one of her decisive motions.

"It was really true," she said, rather defensively. "I hadn't told uncle you were coming."

Stayson had not enough data to answer from, so he made a side excursion and said, at a venture:

"He is evidently absorbed in his own affairs."

"It isn't disloyal of me," she was assuring him, having paid no attention to what he said, and regarding him with the slight knitting of the brows that made one of her chief charms,

index of earnestness as it was, that and the sweet directness of her gaze. "I don't mean to trap him, or spring it on him. Only he dreads things. He hates to know they're coming. So if we have company—it's only once in a hundred years or so—but even Cathie to tea, I mean—I don't tell him. And when it's really happened, he's the better for it. It breaks the current of his thoughts."

"That's all right then. I should hate mightily to have it all wrong, when I'm the interloper."

He was glad to be alone with her again. There seemed to be a great deal he might like to know in the sweet orderly stillness of her mind.

"Oh, no," she said in haste, for Wickham was now returning, "it's good."

Wickham came up the steps and stood looking indecisively at them, perhaps pondering on the possibility of sitting down again to the salutary endurance of their company, or wandering

back into his seclusions. Adelaide put a hand invitingly on the arm of the chair next her.

"Stay a bit," she entreated him. "It's too early for bed."

That evidently decided him.

"I think I'll go up," he concluded. "It's an uncommonly bad night for surfaces. I shall get to bed."

"I'm not sure whether you remember Mr. Stayson's name and what he is doing," she persisted. "Perhaps it didn't make so much impression on you as it did on me. He wrote Senator Reynolds' biography, you know. He's done the life of Mr. Speed."

"Speed!"

The name leaped from his lips, and Stayson involuntarily glanced at him. His face had a new hue of pallor, and his small eyes, gleaming, were at last in evidence. Adelaide, too, was startled. Plainly that amount of emotion was unheard of in him, and called for her customary

soothing when any sort of "surface" plagued him. Yet she, too, with Stayson, drew the swift conclusion that this meant something valid in their common quest.

"Yes, Mr. Speed," she repeated clearly, and having a purpose now, not sparing him, as Stayson saw. "Uncle, did you know Gilman Speed?"

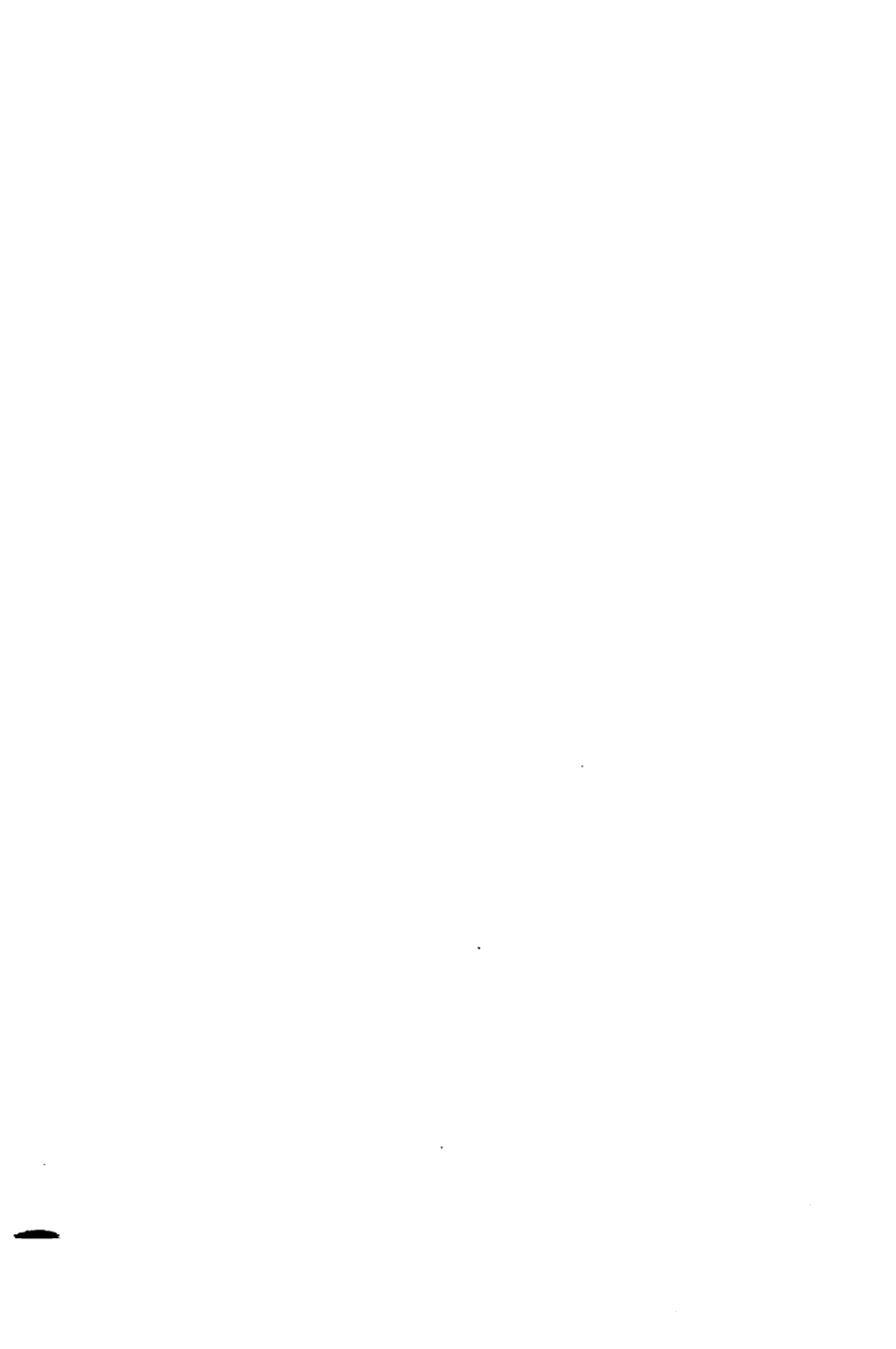
He stood quite still, the veiled look of withdrawal returning upon his face. It was all so silent, save for the frogs peeping in the distance, that Stayson heard a watch ticking, and it fantastically seemed to him like Wickham's hurried heart. Then Wickham spoke.

"No," he said loudly, "I didn't know Gilman Speed."

He turned, and with three steps, quite unlike his uncertain gait of the moment before, gained the hall, and they heard him on the carpeted ease of the stairs. Stayson waited for Adelaide to speak, and she did presently, throwing out

some commonplace about the night. But in his mind, one sentence beat on undisputed, and he knew it echoed back from hers. It was their unspoken reply to Wickham:

“Nevertheless, you do know Gilman Speed!”



CHAPTER III



III

NEXT day Stayson was up early, and having learned from Mary that breakfast would be at a leisurely half past eight, betook himself, by a happy and unconsidered venture where everything looked so abundant in spring tokens, to the back of the house, for a prow. A path through the unmown grass led him to a rolling height, and then another, and from each all he could see in the nearer distance was the unbroken stretch of the Wickham estate, dotted with groves inevitably placed and sliding into the expanse of deeper wood. The elder house he lost finally, but the manor on the height still dominated. He could imagine that it was the beacon for miles about. Here riches spread lavishly, the abundance of the land, the old mansion built to withstand the shocks of time,

and, mothering it all, the transcendent arch of sky. But then, he reflected suddenly, as an offshoot to the owner's enjoyment of such plenty, he was not using it in any adequate way. He was living in a modest fashion with but one maid and a decrepit old man to do the immediate work. Here was luxury, the raw material of it, going shockingly to waste. The more he thought of it, the more the idea tickled his fancy: luxury lying round loose, and nobody to care.

But when he returned to the house, as he did almost at a run, having decided that the breakfast hour was near and he did not even know how far his feet had taken him, he found that there was some one besides the stout serving woman to do the work: Adelaide herself who, with the utmost ease of habit, was sweeping off the veranda. She gave him a gay good-morning, and told him he was not late. Mary herself was behindhand, and the coffee wouldn't

be on for at least ten minutes more. When they did go in, he found they were to breakfast alone. Uncle, she told him, seldom came down before noon.

After the breakfast had been served and the maid had left the room, Adelaide began at once, as if it were a business project they had entered upon together.

"I've been thinking about Aunt Adelaide."

"Yes," he concurred. "I've been thinking of her myself, though I'm afraid I've no business to. You made her very vivid to me."

"Well, she wasn't vivid: certainly not to me, and I used to see her every day. But I've suddenly come to the conclusion that now I've grown up I might find her very vivid indeed."

"You mean you understand her."

"Then, I suppose, I should have liked another kind of person better, somebody with spring and go. Somebody like Cathie Good-

win, perhaps. But Aunt Adelaide always seemed so faded."

That did not, apparently, apply to her physical state, in a way we have of cataloguing a woman's past attractions. She meant it, he could see, in a deeper sense, and now she was continuing, in her way of slowly working out a thing and ponderingly stating it as she went, putting a pin here and there and hanging the words on it as they came, in a desired pattern.

"The only living person—unless it may be Mr. Speed—that knew Aunt Adelaide well, was Cathie Goodwin."

"So!"

That he reflected might place Cathie, also; she could hardly have been a child and known a woman of middle age very well. Surely then she was older than her bright cheeks liked to testify. But Adelaide presently made that conclusion useless.

"Cathie knows everybody better than any-

body else does. She has, ever since she was a child."

"So, as a child, she knew Mrs. Wickham."

"She knows uncle better than I do. She sees exactly what to do for him. She chaffs him, and hectors him, and he hates it all like poison; but it gets his blood stirring, and really he's the better for it."

At that instant, as if the mention of him had conjured up some sign from him, or, guessing at her unwarranted testimony about him, he must speak in rebuttal, Wickham's voice above came in through the open window.

"Hello!" he said. "Hello! What did Incheape close at?"

"It's uncle at the telephone," Adelaide explained. "His room is over this. He doesn't go in town now. He does all his business from here. But I can't get over it," she continued, running back upon the broken current of her thought, "that she knew Mr. Speed. Why

didn't I hear of it? I wasn't so awfully young when she died. And it's a pretty important thing here in New England to have known Mr. Speed. It was then, even."

"Had Mrs. Wickham been in any sense a literary person? Was she interested in letters?"

"I don't know. Cathie'll tell us that. We'll go down to see her after breakfast."

But Cathie came to them, walking fast; it almost seemed to Stayson that she was racing up the avenue. He was alone, and strolled down the path to meet her.

"Where's Adelaide?" she asked, after their greeting, an exchange like that of old friends which yet excited no surprise in him. "Oh, I know," she added, instantly taking a straight chair and refusing his tentative offer of a rocker. "You needn't tell me. She's in the kitchen. Mr. Stayson, doesn't it seem to you a peculiar chapter in plutocratic history—isn't that a grand way to put it!—isn't it raving crazy for

a multimillionaire's niece to be in the kitchen helping to freeze the ice?"

He had no opinion to express, being a guest, a stranger almost, and, he suddenly felt, a partisan of Adelaide even against her familiar friend.

"I'm glad we're going to have an ice," he paltered.

"Nonsense! the ice is figurative. But Adelaide's somewhere in the back regions, and she's at work. What's the matter?"

Wickham's voice had piped out again on the spring air.

"Buy me three thousand Ricefields United," it bade, in its husky tremolo.

At the words Stayson had put up his head and listened without scruple.

"Oh," he said involuntarily, "he mustn't do that."

"Do what?"

"Buy Ricefields United. I've had a tip on

it. It's rotten clear through and the lambs are going to find it out."

"Well," said Cathie, without much interest, "I guess what Morton Wickham doesn't know about his horrid market isn't going to be told him by young biographers just out of the nest. Speculate yourself, Mr. Stayson?"

"No," said Stayson, with a clear-eyed avowal bearing witness to the absurdity of thinking he could. "I haven't the money. But I know chaps that do, and sometimes they tell me things. I like to have 'em. It's a game."

"It's a dirty, nasty, filthy game," she declared. "It's worse than a drug habit, opium, anything. Look here, Mr. Stayson, do you know what Morton Wickham wanted to be—what he was meant to be?"

"No."

"He is a chemist, fitted out and commissioned, sealed orders, in his cradle. He likes to weigh and measure and combine and fore-

cast what one atom might do if another atom ran away with it. Oh, he'd have made discoveries; he'd have been in the most bewildering of them, radium or the rest, if he hadn't got tangled up in the market."

"He could have done both, to an extent," Stayson reminded her.

"He isn't made that way. He goes the whole figure. When his brother was ill for a year or so—he had nervous prostration, I guess, or something near it—Mr. Morton took the reins and tried to keep affairs going. And I fancy the decision was made then. Mr. Stayson, don't you think there's a time in our lives when we're given a big choice?"

Stayson's youth and all the ambitious dreams illuminating it took fire together and flared up in a glory his bodily eyes were fain to close before.

"Yes, I do," he said.

"So do I. I call it the great choice. Well,

Morton Wickham made his choice then. He rolled up an awful lot of money that year. Adelaide—his wife, not this Adelaide—told me so.”

Here was Aunt Adelaide, at last. She was growing, not faded, as the other Adelaide remembered her, but the significant figure in the house. He listened, rather breathless, and wondered how much he ought to know or, really, how much she would tell him if she guessed how much he wanted to know.

“Don’t you see,” she was continuing, “he put into his forecasting and combining and all their infernal work in the market, precisely the faculty God gave him to work in the elements with? He sent out feelers everywhere—he’s got a splendid mind, or had, I’ll say—and scraped his data together, what had happened once, what was likely to happen again. He speculated a lot in industrials, and he knew exactly what he was buying every time, what

its output had been, what its market was going to be. Don't you see, he made his experiments just as he did in chemistry, with precision, with certainty? Money came rolling in, just rolling."

"But he hasn't informed himself about Rice-fields United," he reminded her. "He's going to lose there. Bound to."

"I don't know anything about that. Maybe his shutting himself up here and never going out among men is a bad thing for him—bad for business. He's a nervous wreck, you see. But it wasn't so once, not by any means."

"Ninety-three and a half?" came the voice from above. It held satisfaction of a meagre sort. "Buy a thousand more at the market."

"By George!" Stayson cried. "He's got it. He'd better sell. He'd better sell."

"And here's his niece living like a village dressmaker," Cathie continued, without bitterness but according to her indifferent habit of speech. "Simply because he prefers—prefers?"

insanely determines—to live simply, as he calls it.”

There was nothing Stayson could say that would not be a confession of curiosity, and that, he honestly knew, he must not only suppress in himself, as a stranger within the house, but he actually must not feel it. He was conscious of a sudden warm and reactionary certainty that things were hard for the girl, and that she was meeting them with an admirable courage, something more dignified than patience, as it was more kind.

“She won’t leave him,” Cathie continued, fanning herself with a grape leaf, not as if the day were warm but as if she suddenly found the indignant revulsions within her to be of a fiery nature, “so she has to live exactly as he chooses. And her money is in trust, and he has charge of it. And there he sits at the telephone, week in, week out, piling one dollar upon another—one thousand—one million!”

"He's knocking down his pile, if he's buying Ricefields," Stayson insisted. "Ought I to tell him?"

"Maybe. I don't know. It's a hideous game. It's made me hate all games. I'd rather be whipped than play cribbage with mother. I don't know as I'd even play bean-bag!"

Here Adelaide came out, a little flushed, as if, Stayson thought, now the cue had been given him, she had left the kitchen's heat. He brought forward the chair he saw to be the best of all, and she took it, smiling, with a hand on Cathie's shoulder. There was something in her decisive way and clear-eyed look that indicated she had left business behind her, though of a humble nature it might be, and that she had come for business here.

"Cathie," said she, with a considered directness that meant to lose no time, "did you ever hear Aunt Adelaide speak of Robin Hood's Barn?"

Cathie turned, in most unconsidered amaze, and stared at her. The color had died out of her pink face, and left it changed, older, Stayson thought, almost really old.

"Did you?" Adelaide insisted, with a delicate implication of a right to know. "Did you ever hear of it?"

For a moment Cathie did not answer. Some color ran back into her face, but her mouth and eyes were grave. She offered, in a low voice, a question of her own, but not, it appeared, one to be answered. It might almost have been addressed to some invisible witness of the scene.

"Has that come round again?"

"Do you know, Cathie?" Adelaide was asking, in a fine relentlessness. "If you do, can't you tell?"

Cathie turned to Stayson with a little sad smile, the least ghost of a smile. Her eyes, he thought, were almost crying, and their piteousness it was that made the smile so wan.

"Mr. Stayson," she said, "you know what a *raisonneur* is, don't you?"

"Why, yes," he returned, not seeing how it mattered. "It's the fellow in the play that knows everything and explains everything to everybody, and brings it out right in the end."

"Well, that's the kind of person I am. I suppose it's got a feminine, hasn't it? I know too much about everybody. I like it. I suppose if I didn't, I shouldn't know it. It just comes to me. But sometimes there are things I know I just bury. I throw 'em in the well. I don't think of 'em any more, and I don't let anybody else think of 'em." She was so moved, so distressed in a childlike fashion, that Adelaide saw there was some deep argument for being sorry for her.

"Is that the way about Robin Hood's Barn?" she asked. "Is that in the well?"

"I thought it was," said Cathie whimsically.

"Maybe it's got to be uncovered. There's nothing hidden, is there, that sha'n't be revealed? That's the only comfort about lost things. What do you want to know?"

"Tell her," said Adelaide, and Stayson began.

At the name of Gilman Speed, she nodded sadly as if she knew perfectly well what he had to do with it all, and when Stayson had concluded with his finding of the three letters, she could not suppress her sad amaze.

"Isn't it wonderful," she kept saying, "wonderful! How the wheel turns. You stay in one place just as I've done here with mother all these years, and the wheel's been turning, and it stops in front of me, and there's a little bright red spot on it, and it's Robin Hood's Barn."

"But what is it," Adelaide insisted. "What is Robin Hood's Barn?"

Cathie seemed to rouse herself from wondering to take on her accustomed habit of meeting a situation in the face. She looked at Stayson

and then at Adelaide, sharply, he thought, with an estimating directness.

"The question is," she said, "how much do you want Mr. Stayson to know about family affairs? What is he to us? What is he going to be?"

The question sent a surging responsiveness through Stayson's own veins, perhaps a prophetic questioning whether he ought not to stand up and tell what he was going to be. But Adelaide was answering with a gentleness instinct with dignity.

"Mr. Stayson is Gilman Speed's biographer. It is a question of Mr. Stayson and Mr. Speed."

"Very well. Now how much do you want him to know about your Aunt Adelaide?"

"What would Aunt Adelaide have said?" her niece parried. "How much would she have sacrificed for Gilman Speed's biography?"

Cathie considered.

"I don't need to debate that," she said. "I needn't have thought a minute. She would have sacrificed anything. Do you think," she pursued, now addressing Stayson, "that what I've got up my sleeve would add to Speed's biography, make it fuller, bigger, give people a better idea of him?"

"But I don't know what it is you've got," he reminded her.

It seemed to him they were all three racing for some precious thing ahead of them, a golden apple perhaps bounding on before, and again he felt a little breathless. Only there were two of them on one side, he reflected. If Adelaide got the apple, she would hand it over to him.

"That's true." Cathie was nodding her impetuous assent. "You don't know what it is. Unless I tell you, you never will."

"What would Aunt Adelaide say about that?" young Adelaide again reminded her,

with a definite suggestion of keeping her to the point. "Think, Cathie."

"Oh, I have thought," said Cathie, suddenly and violently. "I knew it would come to this. I've seen it in the air, brewing like a shower. I'm in for it," she continued whimsically, as to the unseen witness. "I've got to tell, haven't I? Well, I'll tell. You never knew your Aunt Adelaide in the least." She said this almost, Stayson thought, in the manner of an accusation. It was as if Adelaide had let some vivid fortune pass her by.

"I told you so," said Adelaide to him. "I never knew her. I can't remember anything about her except, in a vague way, how she used to look."

Cathie continued, in the fashion of one who has piled up a mountain of facts until he can do no more than point at it as something that, having reached such proportions, may be expected to speak for itself.

"She was a great big splendor."

Adelaide stared at her, and Cathie nodded, answering the look.

"Yes, I know," she said. "You thought she was just an old woman. Do you know really how old she was when she died?"

"I never thought," said Adelaide. "Sixty, maybe. Sixty-five."

"She was fifty-two. That ought to be the prime of life. It wasn't for her, because she was unsatisfied, worn out with longing. Why, I never thought of it, but the longing and dissatisfaction made a kind of youth. Adelaide was young."

"We weren't poor then," the girl reminded her. "There was money enough."

"Yes, but enough for what? To make more money, that was all."

"Do you mean Uncle Morton stinted her? she didn't have the things she wanted?"

"Oh, no, he didn't stint her in the things he

thought she ought to have. He bought this place, and added to it every six months, a farm here, a farm there, whatever he could clutch. Then your father bought this house, for old Aunt Lydia to live in, so Aunt Adelaide could see to her. Your mother was dead then. And Morton Wickham and his wife lived alone in the big house, and he went in town every day to make money, and she read to Aunt Lydia and worked in the garden."

Stayson remembered how the big house looked when he saw it in the morning clarity, and it did not seem to him so hard a fate to own its amplitude for the roving of fancies, or the garden where they might come home to brood or gather pollen like the bees. Cathie, as if she had read his mind, answered it instantly.

"But she was a woman. Remember that. She was most awfully alone."

She seemed for the moment to lose herself in

some accustomed maze of brooding, and Adelaide recalled her gently.

"Robin Hood's Barn—we mustn't forget that."

"Do you know whom the big house used to belong to?" Cathie roused herself to ask, appearing to indicate that the question meant as much as its answer.

"No," said Adelaide.

"It used to belong to Gilman Speed."

"Then there's my blunder," said Stayson, in a coil of worriment. "I didn't know it. I said he was born in Hawley, and I never found a syllable to indicate that he ever lived anywhere else, except New York, of course."

"He didn't. He bought this place when he thought he was going to marry Anna Hale."

Stayson nodded. Here he was on wonted ground again.

"The engagement was broken, and he sold it in a month. Morton Wickham bought it.

Did you ever wonder," she continued, turning to Adelaide, "why it was never named?"

"No, I don't believe I ever did. Uncle always called it The Place. Now he doesn't call it anything. He never speaks of it. He won't look at it, even."

"Adelaide wanted it named. So did he, then. She said to him, 'Why not write to Mr. Speed, because he must have had an affection for it to have bought it, even if he sold it afterward?' Speed was beginning to be famous. His books meant enormously to her."

"So she wrote him?" Stayson reminded her.

"With her husband's concurrence. He answered at once that they were very good and he'd tell them what he'd meant to call it—Sherwood."

"This is awfully interesting," said Stayson, chiefly because it was about Speed. Anything about Speed would have been vital to him at that time.

"You see why, don't you?" Cathie asked Adelaide. She had the manner of addressing her personally most of the time, because they two might have a right to Aunt Adelaide's direct confidence, and of letting Stayson in from an oblique recognition of him and his rights as a scribe.

"Sherwood Forest, outlawry, freedom from the customs of the world! Robin Hood!" Stayson cried, with the unnecessary emphasis of the discoverer.

"She wrote and thanked him, and he wrote again, a funny note,—well, a nice cunning note such as you might send to a child, and told her he fancied she'd catch on—"

"Did he say that?" Stayson interrupted.

"No, not exactly. That's my interpretation. He thought she'd understand if he told her he'd had some thoughts of naming it Robin Hood's Barn."

"Oh, ho!" Stayson cried out, but Cathie shook her head at him.

"No, she didn't call it so."

"Why?" asked Adelaide.

"Chiefly because her husband wouldn't let her. You see, she and Speed went on writing, and Morton Wickham went on making money, and though she wanted him to see the letters, he never had time. At first he never had time and then he wouldn't."

The same thought was in Stayson's mind and in Adelaide's. Morton Wickham, the meagre, faded old man up there listening at the telephone for news of the mad city, had been jealous.

"But he wouldn't let her have company, he wouldn't have any of his own choosing," Cathie went on. "She was marooned in her big house. Isn't that what you call it, Mr. Stayson, when a sailor is dropped on a desert island and the crew row back to the ship? Awfully interesting, foreign customs and all that—pieces of eight—doubloons. Well, that's the way it was. It

was her island—a good deal of a desert, too,—and she was marooned.”

Adelaide got out of her chair and walked back and forth across the veranda. Stayson, as he took one glance at her, saw that she looked horrified, afraid even, like one who has had her first revelation of ill. He could understand that she had always regarded Wickham as a dolorous charge of her own, to be pitied, coaxed perhaps into a more wholesome life, but that now suddenly he was cruel. She said that, under her breath; but they heard her.

“Cruel! he was cruel to her!”

“No,” Cathie answered, in a careful justice, “he’d begun to break, that’s all. His nerves were going. He couldn’t bear the sound of voices any more than now he can bear the feeling of the table-cloth.”

But there were tears on Adelaide’s cheeks, and she walked down the steps and stood there,

flicking them away with an indignant motion of her fine hand.

"Isn't she a funny child?" Cathie inquired of Stayson, in a tone of admiring indulgence. "He does precisely the same thing by her. He shuts her up here in exile; but because it's herself she doesn't know it. She thinks it's 'surfaces', and all in the day's work. But it's cruelty just the same."

Adelaide came back now with a composed step and took her place again. As if he must have a reminding share in their colloquy, Morton Wickham's voice floated down to them, a little angry now, with a peevish note in it, half alarm.

"At the market, I tell you. A thousand at the market."

Stayson turned in his chair and openly and plainly listened. He felt he must know whether it was Ricefields that was being bought at the market, and whether he could prevent the buyer from another leap into that abyss.

"So it's accounted for," Adelaide said, with a sigh, judging there was no more to tell. "Robin Hood's Barn is simply the name Aunt Adelaide gave, at least in her own mind, to the big house."

Cathie waited a while, evidently debating. The gray look of trouble came back to her face.

"Well," she said, "we might leave it here."

"But this isn't the place to leave it." Stayson's guess leaped out at her after his quick, unconsidered reading of her face. "It isn't accounted for, really."

She sighed, tired, it seemed, of old miseries and their trailing cloud.

"No," she owned, "it isn't accounted for."

"What would account for it?" he asked her, assuming, whether rightly he did not know, the rôle of questioner, but constrained by his growing interest. "Would the letters?"

She nodded.

"If we only had them!" Adelaide mused.

Then her mind went back to the dead woman's complicated lot, and pitying her, wishing she herself had been old enough to understand in time, she asked impetuously, "You say uncle wouldn't read the letters. Did he ever read them?"

Cathie shook her head.

"No."

"Why not?" Adelaide insisted. "Now, Cathie, why not? Was it just—"

There she paused, and Stayson's mind involuntarily supplied the childish phrase, "just to be hateful?" He had wondered that.

"I think," said Cathie, "he was afraid to."

She answered without consideration, as one who had deliberated so long over a point that she had exhausted its possibilities and yet, for her own ease, had some sort of reason ready.

"Afraid they spoke of him?"

There Adelaide herself balked, as if they were

touching upon things too intimate, coming too close.

"Oh, no! He'd know she wouldn't. He had all the faith in the world in her. But afraid he should see she really got through a stranger some of the happiness she ought to have had from him."

"Then he loved her," Adelaide cried, as if it were a wonder after all they'd been hearing.

"Uncle really loved her."

"He adored her. He made her his god after his everyday god. That was money."

"But he didn't make her happy."

"Oh, he meant to sometime. She was to be a sort of deathbed repentance. Why, everybody waits to be good till they're old or bed-ridden or something. Don't act as if you didn't know that, Adelaide."

"He never got to it," she mused.

"No. Because, before he did get round, another man stepped in and did it—all that

could be done. For most of it, it was too late."

"What do you mean by money's being an everyday god?" Stayson asked, resolved upon understanding as he went.

"I suppose that's a kind of fool way of saying it," Cathie rejoined. She seemed to be speaking with relief now that they had taken a side track, veering slightly from the old questions she had so long vexed her mind upon. "Didn't I tell you finance is only a means to Morton Wickham, the job his mind undertook and can't get rid of because it works that way? He doesn't care for the money after it's made. He's only trying to solve the problem of making it."

"No, I can't understand," Adelaide was saying, shaking her head with a despairing finality. "He wouldn't do things for her. He wouldn't so much as read the letters. And you say he loved her."

"He was bound up in her."

"Do you suppose she really did ask him to read the letters? She was so—oh, she looked so renunciatory! I can imagine she just didn't do it."

"Yes, she did, while she was alive and after she was dead."

"After she was dead?" Stayson threw in.

"She told me on her deathbed," Cathie said deliberately, and her face saddened again with remembrance of what the bequest had cost her, "to ask him, to remind him, to beg him to do it. I was to ask him once a year."

"And have you done it?" cried Adelaide.

"Oh, yes, I've done it."

"Then he must have the letters," Stayson said.

"No," said Cathie, "I've got them."

CHAPTER IV



IV

OF course Stayson's first thought was that if Cathie had the letters, his own way to them was easy. She seemed so sane, so accessible in every part of her mind that it was patent she must know how necessary they were to his acquaintance with every literary corner of Gilman Speed's life. Adelaide spoke wonderingly.

"And you've read them!"

"Oh, yes. She told me to."

"So you could know what you were urging on him," Stayson supplied.

"Yes. So I could assure him he'd nothing to be afraid of."

"And could you?" Adelaide asked quickly, in her turn of swift interpolation. "Could you really do that?"

"Well, it depends," Cathie told them im-

partially. "It just depends on the inside furnishing of Morton Wickham's mind, and that I've never seen."

"You think they might have made some people unhappy?" Adelaide suggested.

"I think they'd have made me confoundedly unhappy, written by a woman I loved." Whatever bluff mode Cathie took of expressing herself, it seemed to suit some side of her, and never to offend. She might have chartered erratic ways, and announced herself as possessed of all the rights to use them. Perhaps it was her evident good faith. It was impossible to feel that she would wave the flag of wilful silliness or bravado save for some sane demand of her own nature.

Adelaide ventured the question on which the whole situation ought to hang before they could illuminate it really from any point.

"Then they showed she was devoted to him."

"They showed a million things Adelaide Wickham never knew they did," said Cathie, "a million things she never would have betrayed. And his letters—"

"You've got his letters, too?" Stayson threw in heatedly.

"Yes, his letters, too. They showed he knew what she was telling him, and was protecting her from ever knowing it. Oh, he was a big splendor, too. You were mighty lucky to do the life of Gilman Speed," she added to Stayson. "He was all right."

"But what were the things he knew?" Adelaide insisted. "What were the things she betrayed to him?"

"First, she was starving, for companionship, for daily company even. She wasn't allowed to have a guest. I told you that. Then she'd begun to read. She'd begun to agonize over the troubles of the world. And she couldn't help 'em. She'd no money."

"No money!" Adelaide cried passionately. "Cathie, I can't believe you."

Cathie looked at her with a slow, convinced and most pitying smile. It said, "Well, do you have any money? Why should she have had?"

"There wasn't any," she responded briefly. "It was in the market, on the gaming table, so to speak."

"But she might have had a little—compared."

"Yes. She had the little. Only she wanted a lot. She had a scheme for building houses, guest houses, homes where tired folks could be entertained. They weren't to be institutions. They were to be just old-fashioned homes, and folks were to be invited to make visits in 'em, and get rested, or get well, and learn to be of good cheer."

"She told all this to Speed?" Alaric asked.

"Yes," Cathie said, adding defensively, "but she'd told it to her husband first."

"Speed understood then," Adelaide announced conclusively.

Stayson saw she was beginning to have enthusiastic opinions of Speed, and with the emulation of the natural man, wished she might pronounce some sort of good verdict on him, too.

"He understood, and he set himself to work to help her."

"How could he? Speed was poor," Stayson reminded Cathie.

"I know it. He said so. He kept laughing about it all the time. But he'd an idea he might write a novel that would sell. Or a play. He thought he might write a play."

"Did he?" Stayson cried incredulously. "Was he bitten, too? I never knew that."

"Oh, I don't think he cared about the play, only that was a way to coax the money to come rolling in. Then they could have their Robin Hoods."

"Robin Hood's Barn!"

She nodded.

"I don't know exactly why, except that it's the foolish things that stick. They'd laughed about the name in the beginning, and then they tacked it on their rest house, and when they planned another they tacked it on that, too. And when they'd got a whole colony, they were all Robin Hoods."

"I see," Stayson mused. "Robin Hood's Barn—'all outdoors'. They were going to find out derelict minds and bodies and open all outdoors to them. 'Twas Robin Hood who robbed the rich and gave it to the poor.'"

"Who was going to carry them on?" Adelaide asked quickly. "Who was to be at the head of them? Aunt Adelaide?"

"No. She had a presentiment she shouldn't live very long. I was to be at the head of them, if they came in my day. After that"—her voice fell as if this were a confidence she had

been deputed sometime to make, "after that, you were."

"I!" Adelaide cried, incredulous. "I was only a little girl."

"Well, she expected you to be a big girl sometime."

"Oh!" she exclaimed vehemently, as if to herself. "And I never knew her!"

"Then," Stayson asked, in his incisive way, "it was a project she hoped to see completed after her death?"

"No," Cathie assured him, with a sadness to which she had apparently long ago accustomed herself. "She had given it all up."

"Why?" Adelaide demanded.

Her cheeks were hot, her calm eyes flaming. Stayson could see the quest had been passed on. She had snatched the torch from the dead woman's hand, and was prepared to run with it. But Cathie had reached a full stop.

"You mustn't ask me that," she warned her.

"Maybe I ought to tell you, but I don't know. Anyway, don't ask me."

"It concerns me," Adelaide assured her breathlessly. "You must tell me. You shall."

Stayson got up, ready to walk away and leave them. They had forgotten him, he thought, and family secrets were too near invasion.

"Don't go," Adelaide bade him, with a little imperative motion of the hand, yet as if she scarcely saw him. "I want you to hear it. Whatever it is, you must hear."

"Why do you want me to stay?" he asked, recalling her with a considered gentleness. "Some of these things don't concern Speed. I've no right to them."

"I want you to judge," she declared at once. Her face was flaming with a tragic pride. "You belong in the world. You're a man. You know how men regard things. There's very little that hasn't been said already about us—about the Wickhams. This is something else, I sup-

pose. I want you to tell me whether it is just for us to be so blamed."

She was holding her head high and speaking with that same defensive pride; but he saw through it, with a pang, how she had felt it all, how she had suffered in their hideous notoriety.

"That's it," Cathie was saying. "She had begun to read things in the papers, things about the Wickhams. She'd begun to be certain she never could use the money, even if her husband would let her. It was poisoned, she said. It was unclean."

"What did Speed say?" Stayson put in recklessly.

He felt he must conceive something to cover the shamed silence at his side. Whether the girl's bright head was bowed with the burden of it he did not know, or whether she could face it with that eagle's look, staring into the sun of righteous blazonment.

"Nothing," Cathie answered. "He treated

her very gently. I don't mean she ever asked him about it. She was loyal as the day. But the letters asked him without her knowing it. And it was then he began to promise her—it was all a joke, you know, but each of them read what was underneath—he began to promise her he'd do it himself."

"And he never did it," Adelaide said slowly. "He died and never did it."

"Well, she followed him right along," Cathie returned briefly. "So it's all one to them. And I guess if there is another life—"

Here she paused, but Stayson's mind supplied her guess. It was that somewhere in the uncharted brightness of the soul she and Speed were together. But it was not all one to him. He wanted to know more about Speed here on earth.

Cathie had risen to her feet. The motion was a tired one; the spring and zest of her were gone. Stayson thought if he had seen her

so in the beginning, he should have had little doubt of her being a woman declined into years, or at least into the accumulated griefs belonging to them. Her face had not only paled, but the tissue had shrunk under that roseleaf skin and left the lines of age.

"I'll go now," she said, in a curiously childish adaptation of an informal leavetaking. Apparently the purpose for which she had been sent there by some unknown destiny was at least partially fulfilled, and she was tired. The others, too, rose, Adelaide quickly, with a detaining eagerness.

"But you can't," she asserted, "you mustn't. We never can talk like this again."

Cathie gave her a wan smile.

"All the better," said she. "It's only blazing up old embers. What's the good?"

"We can't do it again," Adelaide was insisting. "We must finish now."

"Well, haven't we finished?"

"No!" She stood up straight and looked down at Cathie lingering there in her obscure sorrow. "There's something in those letters to be cleared up. They affect us all, somehow. They affect me."

"I don't think they affect you, dear," said Cathie ponderingly. "How should they?"

"If there are things in them about my uncle, there are things about my father. The letters must show how she regarded them—about money. I mean, the way they were making it. They must show how she regarded them both."

"Isn't it strange," Cathie said wonderingly, still to the unseen fourth beside them, "to think of that woman—that gentle creature who never dreamt of ruling in her life, rising up to judge them now she is dead!"

"She must have wanted to influence him," Adelaide cried uncontrolledly, "her husband. Else why did she keep asking him to read the letters?"

"To make him see there was no offence in them, to make him realize they weren't love letters from any possible point of view," Cathie responded patiently. "I told you that."

"Then she must have loved him," Adelaide declared. Something rebellious flamed out in her face. "I'm sorry," she owned impetuously. "I did want her to love Speed. Not to say so! no! no! not to be disloyal, but to have had something big and splendid—you said she was a big splendor—to dream of and hold in her arms."

Stayson, looking at her, could not look away. The cool, capable creature who had come to his dull attic that other morning was miraculously changed. Heat and power were in her face, the unconscious passion of a woman who suddenly sees the door open into the great temple where women go to worship that which is not themselves.

Cathie was speaking, with a tired coolness.

"Well, she had that fast enough."

"But she must have loved her husband, or she wouldn't have tried to will the letters to him."

It was the strangest thing, Stayson thought, to hear that old worn voice at the telephone overhead, and remember it was actually Morton Wickham they were talking about: yet from all the living power the real Morton Wickham wielded now, it might have been a figure in a novel or a play.

"Pity," Cathie was responding. "She pitied him. She pitied him in a million ways: his poverty, his lovelessness, and I suppose, when she realized he hadn't got her any more, the whole of her, she pitied him for that. So all she could do for him she wanted to do. She could at least leave him the evidence that she hadn't been wandering in any common sense. So she left him the letters."

"How did she happen to have both sets of

them, hers and Speed's?" Stayson asked her. "Speed didn't return hers, did he?"

"Yes. After they had gone on for some time she asked for them, still with the thought of Morton Wickham. I have an idea Mr. Speed didn't want to give them up. He said so: said there were three that meant neither one thing nor another he'd retain. I'm going now," she said to Adelaide. "Don't stop me."

But Adelaide was with her at the head of the steps.

"When did you ask him last?" she said. "When did you ask him last to read them?"

"I don't know. But there! I do. Of course, I know, and of course I've got to tell. It's my infernal luck to be the spoon that stirs the pot. I asked him last December."

"He refused?"

"I told you so. He always does."

"I wonder he's willing to hear them mentioned," Adelaide brooded.

"You wonder he can bear the sight of me? Well, he couldn't if he didn't remember what has come and gone. He remembers I liked Adelaide. He remembers Adelaide liked me."

There were stronger words for the tie between the two, Stayson guessed, but Cathie was too bluff to use them.

"When are you going to ask him again?" Adelaide insisted.

Cathie was halfway down the path. She turned her old, worn face upon them.

"I don't know," she said, and then added, in an outburst, "oh, I suppose—tonight."

"Tonight?" Adelaide's hurried voice pursued her. "Will you come to supper?"

"No, I'll come after. I'll be here at eight."

They both stood watching her while she made her way down the path seeming, perhaps, as if she would like to escape from them as directly as possible, her parasol low upon her shoulders in defiance of any pretext of shade,

but hooding her completely. When it was imperative to do so or prolong their embarrassed consciousness of each other, Stayson turned to Adelaide and saw, not a face blurred by tears as he had expected, but set in a meaning too deep to allow the luxury of hiding. He understood at once, it seemed to him, just what she was thinking. She had received the dead woman's message and made it her own. All that Adelaide who had died had meant for the world or the fulfilment of her own dreams, the young Adelaide might accomplish. For the first time, overwhelmingly, he felt the power of money at its flood. Hitherto he had thought of it only as the minion that was, if he were lucky, to buy him a comfortable chair and a warm fire and the leisure to read Euripides and try his own luck at the written word. Here, he saw, it could erect a castle, blocked out in the Spain of a woman's dream, it could build a city almost. It could assuage old desires

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so vital that it seemed as if they might walk yet, and it could start the gallant blood moving in a young girl's veins. Adelaide's mind was hand in hand with his as her eyes met him in a perfect understanding and concurrence.

"I shall have my own money in a year and three months," she said to him. "Uncle holds it in trust till then."

"You could do it," Stayson confirmed her. "You will do it. You'll go round over the world dotting down Robin Hoods."

"Here, chiefly," she said, falling at once into the antiphony of certainty. "The first one shall be the big house. Uncle would let me. I could make him. I could tell him how she'd love it. And the rest—oh, there are acres and acres that belong to me." But she stopped short here, as if panic struck her. "How can I forget," she said, in a tone in horrified wonder at itself, "what I was afraid of? Why, I'm afraid of it still. I'm more afraid."

"What are you afraid of?" Stayson asked her.

She seemed to him as dear as the lovely earth, and as identified with his life. He made no doubt he could save her from her fears, or at least, in the way of youth, he would arrogantly try.

"What she was afraid of, too." It might have been a spectre there before them for the pallor of her look. "To know she felt it has made me more afraid. Of the money itself—the way they made it—don't you see?"

"Because it was made in business?" Stayson suggested rather weakly, for he understood too well.

"Oh, you know better than that," she answered, with a disdainful recklessness. "Because it was made by trickery, tricking other men. You know the outlines of the whole miserable story; so do I. But I had a hope, a little tiny hope, that somehow underneath

my father wasn't guilty. I felt if we probed deep enough, we might find he just played a game, and didn't know the awful outcome. I was a fool."

"Why are you so sure you are a fool?" Stayson comforted her. "Why not take it on a reasonable ground? You can't really know the springs of a man's actions."

"Oh, yes, you can, in the end. It all comes out. Look at Aunt Adelaide's life. It seemed as if it were crushed by a million tons' weight—a violet under a boulder, and only the boulder to be found marked with her name on it—and now something rolls away the stone, and there's the violet."

"Yes," cried Stayson, the poetic vein in him running warm. "And it's living. By Jove, the flower's living there!"

"Well, what rolled away the stone? Fate? What is fate, anyway? The fate of your writing a biography of Speed?"

"That's one step," he owned, not anxious for her to continue further, lest she come to her own part in the hot unravelling.

"Well, behind that? Your writing such a good biography of Reynolds that I knew you'd see my father as he was, just as you saw Reynolds? Oh, what a fool I must have been!"

"There!" said Stayson, whimsically trying to lead her from the field of mortification and regret. "Now see what you've said. You'd only to know me a little to take back some of your flattering inferences."

"That was my one minute of thinking money could do most things," she asserted, still in disdain of her past self. "I thought it would pay you for helping me to an understanding of my father. I had to learn a man like you wouldn't touch a life such as that."

"Oh, come now!" he cried, sorry not more for her than for the father who had left so ig-

noble a portrait behind him, and was beyond the possibility now of retouching it to a better outline. "It's a dramatic life. It's a life lots of fellows would be mighty glad to get hold of."

"Ah, but you weren't glad. You simply wouldn't touch it. To unravel the moves of that old game—money, money, money, dice on the table, maybe loaded dice,—well, it wasn't worth your while. That ought to have said to me, 'No, he doesn't believe in the Wickhams. If he did, he'd jump at such a chance to set them right.'"

"But heavens!" Stayson cried, feeling she pushed him against some wall of ultimate appeal where he must stand and defend even Wickham against her fiery spirit. "You don't mean to say you'd let any man take that responsibility—ignorantly, mind you—of deciding whether you were to use your father's money?"

"Of course I mean it,—a man that could see

into the hearts of men as you saw into Reynolds'."

"But, dear lady, I told you before Reynolds was a simple proposition. And because I did one thing fairly well, to give me the power of life and death over another man's memory—why, it's ghastly."

Her hot mood had passed, and she was ready now to smile. But the smile was a defiant one, and he saw she had meant to do precisely that.

"I never knew anybody so headstrong," he was smiling back at her.

"Well," she insisted, with a little shake of her head, prettily accomplished, "you've given your verdict anyway. You saw the life had holes in it. You weren't willing to patch them up."

"You make me an infernal prig. I never'll touch a biography again if that's the outcome of it."

"You've told me what you thought just as

much as if you'd really told me," she insisted obstinately. "You as much as said to me that day, 'If you care how money was made, don't touch it for your life.'"

"I didn't; I protest I didn't. I never thought it."

"And I'm pretty sure," she said gravely, "I'm very sure I sha'n't touch it."

"Not to build your Robin Hoods?"

"Not even to build them. But the letters will tell me that. I depend on the letters."

Stayson stood looking off into the garden where all manner of green things were springing and little blooms of pink and blue were dotting here and there. Youth pulsed within him and all the world seemed like the garden, young, full of soft renewals and gay certainties. Nature was calling to him in her eloquent harmony that it was easy to accomplish. The bravest things were yet to do. The strongest sinews were those that now held taut. His eyes

came back to her where she stood, forgetful of him, in her own grave musing.

"If that is true," he said, "if you won't build your Robin Hoods, somebody will have to build them for you."

"Like Mr. Speed," she reminded him sadly. "But even he couldn't do it. He had to die."

"Speed wasn't young," he told her, exulting in the certainty that today all things were new. "He hadn't time."

"Even he couldn't," she insisted. "And he was promising it to the woman he loved. No, I won't say it again," she added quickly, reading, she thought, his start and wonderment, "not while uncle's alive. She wouldn't like it. But Speed did love her. The letters will tell us so. Come, let's get some lilacs for the house."

He went out with her, and they broke lilac branches, and in the fragrance of them thought each of Speed and the woman he must have loved. Stayson suddenly felt envy of him, and

wonder, too: for he had known Speed was disappointed in his hope of marriage, though never that he had this subtle compensation, a dream not to be broken because they had had the wisdom and the honor to leave it as it was—a dream. Speed had had the best of it. He had sacrificed to honor and to love, and Stayson understood that it would be best for this girl also to sacrifice to honor as she saw it, even if it left her poor.

“All the same,” he said, absently breaking her a branch of lilac she had tried to reach, “all the same, I wish you could have your Robin Hoods.”

“Yes,” she said. She, too, seemed far away. From the color in her cheek and the mistiness of her look, she might have been walking in Persian gardens where the lilac bloomed at home and nightingales betrayed ecstatic mysteries. “Yes, I wish so, too.”

Then as Stayson was turning to her with a

smile, the veil of things seen waved before him dizzyingly. He saw the meaning of the whole bright pageant. It seemed to him he saw it with a perfect clarity, though never had he been so divinely immersed in the sea of sense. All this around him was the lyric promise of the vernal year. It vowed itself to warm fulfillments. The earth was in a rapture of growth and bloom. And this spirit of the time touched him not with lightest finger bidding him look on and note the rhapsody; it pulled him into the dancing rout and bade him forget himself and, in a climbing wave of irresponsible hope, be one with earth's desires and immortalities. And he heard himself saying in a voice rough with the unusedness of the emotion it carried:

"Yes, Speed loved her. But he didn't love her a grain more than I do you. Don't you see I do?"

Then the earth dream that was only a shade less

immaterial than its mystic counterpart, broke, and with hot yet clear eyes he saw the girl's face confronting him in a pallor and sternness that looked inexorable. It had passion, too, in it, but a passion imperiously removed from him.

"Give me time," he heard himself say stupidly. "You've got to be persuaded. I need time."

"No, no," she said vehemently, "no!"

"Don't tell me you've promised another man," said Stayson, in a terror now lest she should speak and her saying should make it so.

"I haven't promised any man," he heard her say. Tears were in her eyes. They might have been tears of regret, of an overwhelming pity, and they certainly were not for him. "And I sha'n't. I'm not going to do—the thing you mean. I've got to do the things my father ought to have done and—oh, I hate this kind of talk. If I'd thought you were—like that—I wouldn't have asked you here."

She was all a tumult of revolt, and discerning the gallant spirit of her, Stayson knew she felt her mood to the limit of it and would stand to it. He had made a blunder. She was a "woman soldier". Had she got to be won like an amazon or never really won? In a violent sex hatred and desire, he wondered if he cared whether he won her at all.

"Want me to go?" he asked. His lips quivered and he shut them close.

"Yes," said she, "you'd better."

They stood looking at each other like enemies, their arms full of lilacs. Then Stayson began, though she did not know it, to tremble, and upon that he laughed. Having begun laughing he kept on uncontrollably and she watched him at first in an ingenuous surprise and then in a frank anger. But she did smile a little finally.

"Come in," said he, "and fix your lilacs. I'm a little crazy, that's all. Don't mind. You

don't know me really. I don't feel as if I knew either of us."

Instantly she became her frank good self.

"All right," said she. "Come in and find the jugs."

Stayson could not even glance at her as they set the lilac branches in an ordered efflorescence. He felt hostile to her and savagely angry with himself. What was he doing, he asked himself hotly, making violent onslaught upon the affections of a strange young woman? He shouldn't know what to do with her if he got her. The spring was a base jade if she had led him as far as this; and thinking that, a grave voice within him bade him cease his trivial accounting to the little gods. The high gods were up in their sky, overlooking all this coil.

They were Speed's gods, he knew. Speed had had no commerce with the little gods at all. In a shock of shame and anger, he glanced again at Adelaide carrying a vase of lilacs

uplifted, as if it were tribute to an altar, and he saw she also would have no traffic with the lower gods, no recognition of them even. A minute ago, in his anger against her repulse of him, he had felt strength in his arms to hold her while he kissed her till she loved to kiss. Now she looked tired, and he was sorry. He took the vase from her and set it on the book-case for which she had intended it.

"I wish you'd come to walk," he said humbly, "and show me some of the pretty places."

She looked at him in a wistful gratitude. It almost seemed from that look as if no one had taken the trouble to be kind to her before.

"I will," she said, "this afternoon. I've got things to do now. You'll find books, won't you, or anything you like?"

She slipped away, and Stayson, in the loss of her, wondered again what power or spell this was. He took some books of the poets to the veranda, but he could not read them, and sat,

his chin propped upon his hand, thinking with wonder how lonely he had been, and how the city chimney pots had withdrawn themselves almost out of memory. Today it seemed as if they had never known anything about him or about the man he was until Adelaide Wickham and her apple blooms had crossed his sill.

CHAPTER V

V

THE morning passed like a grave, incomparable dream, and at the table he found Adelaide with perhaps an added mantle of reserve upon her, ready to meet him frankly on the terms of their first intercourse. Finding he still expected it, they set out together afterward, and walked and walked, with apparently no purpose save that of her showing him the places—brooks and violet banks and evergreen coverts—she had loved when she was a child. There was no talk of prospective housebuilding on the lines of the other Adelaide's passionately conceived legacy to the world, nor any searching of her memory to discover what they did not already know. Yet they had, by tacit agreement, gone back to reverent companionship with her and Speed. Her spirit seemed to be most potently with

them. Stayson thought of that in a dumb wonder, as he walked: how not even Speed's fame was of a more lasting texture than the desires of this obscure woman who was dead. The desires might have been the fruit of her starved instincts: she had had no children, no companionship in her marriage, no power of shedding the glow of her hospitality, and it might have been supposed that these were the flaming up of natural longings, to die when the body does, frozen by the "chill of the grave". But she seemed in some way to have written them upon the air and they were coming out under a new mordant of memory; she had insisted, had made her prayers mighty, and the universe had to hear. Would it listen, would it obey? Stayson wondered, with a quick and throbbing intensity of will that it should obey, if only to make the whole drama consummate.

Adelaide, he believed, was not thinking of it. She was suddenly buoyant, recalled to an earlier

youth in a fashion that delighted him. Suddenly, when they had run a race and over the low stone wall without halting even for her acceptance of his offered hand, she stopped and looked at him with clear eyes that yet pathetically demanded pardon.

"You'll think I'm a tomboy," she said, like a maiden anxious to fulfil all the requisitions of petticoated virtues.

"There aren't any tomboys now," he assured her. "It's share and share alike. How you do sprint."

"I never play with anybody of my own age," she said, still in her anxious vindication. "I don't know how to behave."

"You don't?" said Stayson. "Poor little beggar!" he added under his breath, thinking of Wickham in his gloved seclusion from the tangible world.

"What did you say?" she called back to him from a knoll she had mounted first only, it

seemed, to get a little more of the glory of the world, the wind and sheen of it.

"Nothing."

He laughed. The spring made him, too, delirious, in a sane boyish way, the spring and coming back to some old forgotten fount of belief and fantasy. He thought again of the chimney pots from his city window, and wondered how they had been able to keep him so long, he who was born in the country and knew all her homely secrets.

When they got back to the house he looked at Adelaide, to see how she had been changed by their buoyant hours. He was changed, he knew. Now he had his grip again. She met his glance with a laughing one of her own. Her hair was bright under the sun, curling in its crisp healthiness, and her cheeks were rosy fire.

"You look as if you'd seen Bacchus," he mocked her.

"No," she said. "I've seen Pan."

In the later afternoon she left him, for tasks of her own, and he wandered about the place again and up and down the house. These hours, he felt, were the only ones wherein he was to be at ease. After Cathie had come, they would have to be considering things again, unravelling the casuistry of honor, deciding, for he made no doubt that he was to help decide, whether Adelaide should spend her father's money, or hold herself free of the stain of it. She seemed such a gallant creature, so foreign to all the possible smirches of earth, that he gravely felt and almost decided it would be better for her to impoverish herself at the call of an almost fantastic honor than to compromise at reason's call. He had learned that the soul may be hurt by obeying the too-just empery of the mind; his own had been, he believed, by that creeping knowledge that, if so much money were flowing everywhere, he, too, might dip up some of it. It would be better, since Adelaide's inner keeper

of the shrine shrank somehow from the plenty thrust upon her, that she should renounce it and live in austere penury. He could understand how a woman who even saw the ways of business chicanery as clearly and shrank from them with as quick distaste, might take the money that came to her stained and administer it warmly. But not Adelaide, if her instinct still revolted. As she felt, so it must be.

Wickham, quite silent and with an air of having things of his own to brood on, came down to supper and ate sparingly, evidently, in an access of nervousness, hardly enduring to touch his fork, though with the protecting glove. As to Adelaide, the bacchic life had faded out of her. She looked grave, and there was a resolution about her mouth firmly shut on words she did not utter yet. She had said to Stayson, as they heard Wickham's step upstairs before the supper was announced:

"I'm afraid we're going to be cruel to him."

Stayson, too, was afraid of that. Wickham, in his tottering seclusion, seemed too poor a thing to be unsettled by casuistries he had probably ceased to concern himself about. It would not be long before Wickham was dead; he was dead and alive now.

"Why do you bother him?" he asked.

Her look was frankly questioning.

"Why, we've got to. It was what she wanted."

"But changed circumstances make all the difference in the world. She hadn't seen him as he is, old and—feeble."

The last word was but a weak dilution of what he felt about Wickham.

"I know it." But though she concurred, she was evidently not accepting that as argument.

"Still it was what she wanted. I should not for a moment refuse to do it."

"But she may not—" he searched about for a phrase which should not express more orthodox belief than he owned, and yet should carry

what just conviction they both had a right to feel, "she may not want it now."

"Oh, she does," Adelaide said clearly, with no implication of anything odd in her certainty. "She does."

He looked at her a moment, judging her as coolly as he could through the fervid sympathy he had for her, the way she had lived, the complication she found herself born into.

"Well," he agreed, "if you're going to build your Robin Hoods, you certainly want to know all you can about them."

"Unless I know, I can't build them at all; for unless I know what Aunt Adelaide knew, I sha'n't be able to take or leave the money that's coming to me."

"Surely. And you feel as if the letters will tell you."

"They'll at least tell what she felt."

"And you can't read the letters unless your uncle reads them, too."

"I know Cathie. She never'd let me. She's as bound to Aunt Adelaide as I am: more, for she's been bound for years."

"I see. So you're bound to read the letters. And Morton Wickham's got to be the sacrifice."

"Oh, don't say that. Why should anybody be a sacrifice?" Her eyes were humid in their appeal, and he saw she was a softhearted woman in the making under her surging youth.

"I wanted to put it as strongly as possible," he assured her. "Perhaps Wickham actually couldn't bear to hear them read. Don't you know when people say they can't do things, sometimes they actually can't? It's like a dog's being gun-shy. I had my lesson about that four or five years ago. There was a chap we knew pretty well and he was afraid of the water. We used to go down to the Point to swim, and he'd go with us and try to go in. But he couldn't. He didn't dare."

"What made him go? Why didn't he keep away from it altogether?"

"He thought he was a coward."

"He was, wasn't he?"

"I don't know exactly. Anyway, one day some of the fellows got hold of him and put him under."

"Well, what then?"

"He died, that's all."

"They didn't drown him?"

"Oh, no. He died of shock, heart failure or something."

"Were you one of them?" she asked impetuously, whether to blame him he could not tell, or to pity, if he had to carry about the brutal memory.

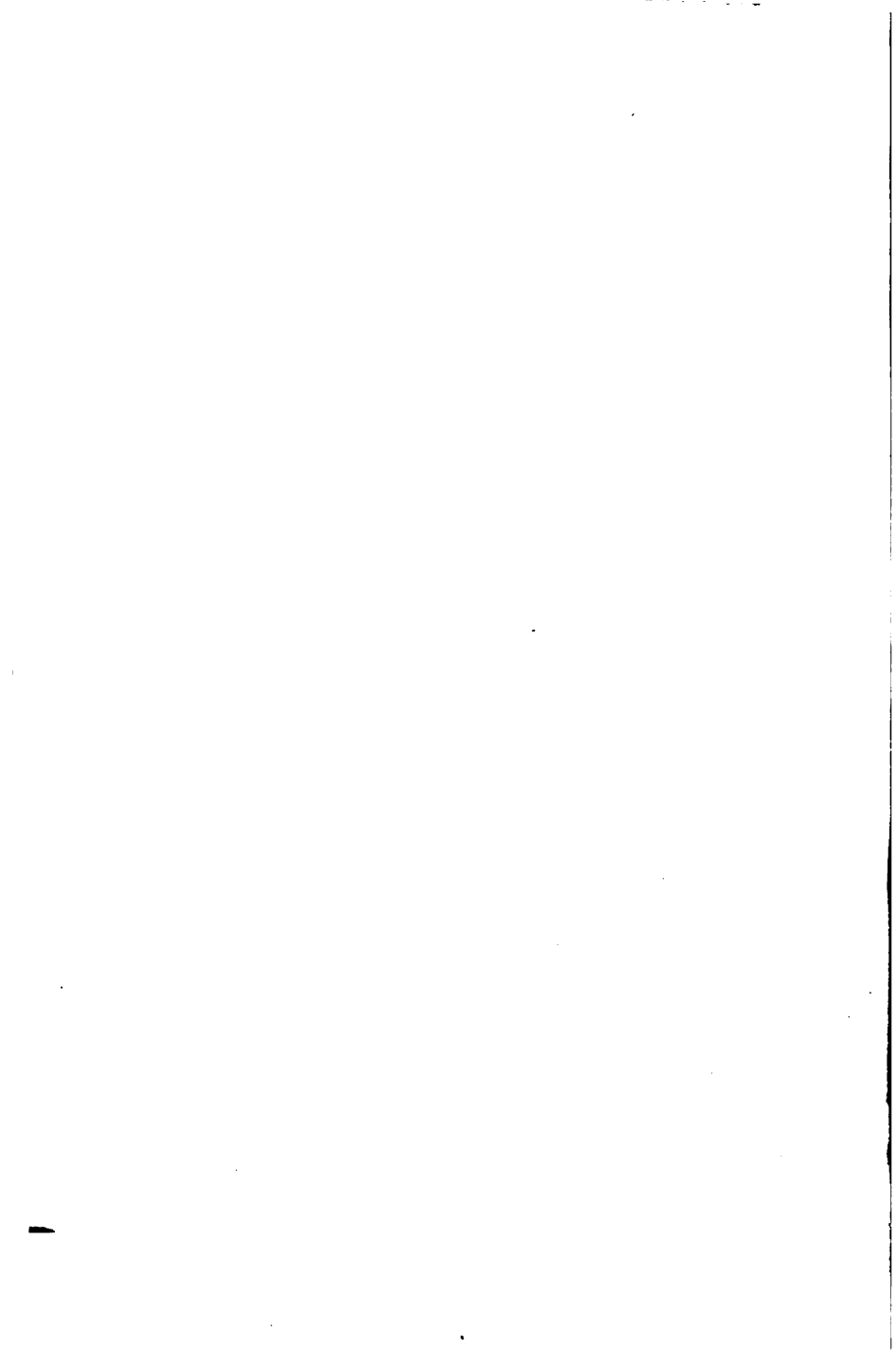
"I didn't happen to be there that day," he answered, as if it were a doubtful fortune.

"You would have saved him. It never would have happened."

He liked that tremendously.



"IT WAS THEN THAT WICKHAM CAME DOWN THE STAIRS"



"I don't know," he said. "I might not have interfered, even if I hadn't been in it. Or it might not have done any good. You won't let me save Morton Wickham."

And it was then that Wickham came down the stairs.

It was just as they were leaving the table that Cathie walked in. She had got back all her youth the morning had reft from her, and had dressed for this event in a thin floating gown, bright green, with ribbony satin stripes, that waved in lustre down its shiny length. Remembering how he had seen her that morning, how gray and overlaid with lines of care, Stayson thought for a moment that she must have run to art for the steady rose-pink in her cheeks. But her nearer aspect declared it was not so. She had called upon something dauntless within to steady her breath and cause her blood to move. He could see also that she judged the standpoint from which to regard these serious

things to be that of her accustomed reckless badinage.

"Mr. Wickham," she said, forcing a handshake on him, an unusual requisition, evidently meant to challenge his attention, "you've got to do something for me tonight."

He looked at her as if she had jarred him out of musing and, the clasp accomplished, stared at his gloved hand frowningly, in a real perplexity, wondering what contamination it had gathered.

"Sit down, all of you," Cathie commanded. "Mr. Stayson, you're in this because you were Mr. Speed's biographer."

At that, Wickham did start and, as Stayson felt, came broad awake. Stayson caught one bright, liquid gleam from the eyes in their habitual hiding. He could guess that Wickham actually did awaken when some triumph of combination in the money game assured him that he was master over his weaving brain. Cathie had seated herself in a little chair where

she looked small and humble, quite unlikely to get events by the ears, but a bright spot of color in the shaded room. She stooped now from her low estate and drew forth from under the table a lacquered box.

"They're not in that?" Adelaide asked incredulously.

Cathie nodded. She had slipped a key from her chatelaine and now unlocked the box.

"But you asked me to take care of that for you," Adelaide pursued. "You asked to leave it there the year you went abroad."

"Of course I did," said Cathie. "It had to be somewhere, hadn't it?"

"But you didn't even make it safe."

"I hoped the house would burn down and I should never see it again. I wished it would die. I thought if it did, it would prove the other two that had died didn't care about it any more. But it didn't die. It won't. It's got immortal life, I guess."

Morton Wickham was listening now, sitting a little forward in his chair, the tips of his gloved fingers delicately together.

"What have you there?" he asked in a halting way, as if he accomplished a voluntary question blunderingly, or even through another tongue.

Cathie answered him in a brisk, perfectly commonplace fashion, as one might light a match to show a child afraid of conflagration that fire set to common use has no uncanny power.

"They're just Adelaide's letters, Mr. Wickham, hers and Mr. Speed's. I'm going to read them to Mr. Stayson. I've got to, you know. He's Mr. Speed's biographer, and he'll have to have the facts."

Suddenly they saw that Wickham was trembling and trying to master it. He sought to hold the tips of his gloved fingers together, but they beat upon each other and would not still. Meantime he found his voice.

"I forbid it," he cried, with violence. "I forbid it."

This was apparently what Cathie had expected, and she paid no manner of heed.

"I sha'n't have to look at the dates," she said practically. "They're all in order. This is the first."

The first, a sheet of thick paper, was unfolded in her hand.

"I forbid it," Wickham cried again.

He had got on his feet, and Stayson watched him, not knowing yet whether he meant to snatch the paper, seize the box and make way with it, or whether he wished simply to escape.

"Sit down," said Cathie. She spoke with an assured decision, like one attempting to compel a child over whom she has recognized control. Wickham seemed to waver a little on his feet. "Sit down," she said again and he obeyed her, but more, Stayson thought, as if he had no

strength to make the counterpoise against her will.

Cathie was looking directly at him. She would have been looking into his eyes save that they were again in hiding and his whole face seemed distorted in the effort to shut itself against the encroaching judgment of the world.

"These letters have got to be read," said Cathie, in a tone uncolored by any tinge of feeling, "by me, too. Mr. Wickham, you remember what she wanted. You were to hear the letters. Well, the time has come, and you must hear them."

"Let me have them," he said, in a voice so low that Adelaide, who was farther from him, was scarcely sure of her interpretation, and now bent forward breathlessly. "By myself. I will read them by myself."

"No," said Cathie, "you'd think you would, but you wouldn't. They'd lie there in the box

and scream, as they've been screaming all these years."

"Don't," he said involuntarily, and Stayson wondered if that recalled something to him, if he had ever heard a woman he loved in his meagre fashion screaming against life. But he thought not, and what Cathie said confirmed it.

"No, though," she conceded, "they don't scream. They lie there still, as if they were in a grave. There's nothing stiller. But it has to be heard. The grave has to be heard."

Whether she was allowing herself a shade of melodramatic emphasis in order to influence Wickham, Stayson did not know; but the tone made his own flesh creep.

"Sit where you are," Cathie said to Wickham, again as if she were speaking to a child. "You and I are the only ones here, Mr. Wickham, that knew Adelaide at all. We're the only ones that knew what she was, and loved her. We've got to stand by her and read her letters

because she wanted 'em read, and because it's best. Now I'm going to begin."

She did begin, reading the first, a casual yet reverential note any admiring woman might have written to an author worshipped in the gates. That was the first. She looked up, to say to Adelaide:

"You see it's what I told you, about the name of the house. The next six or eight are in the same style, all about the house. I'll run them through. They're not very important. They begin with the second or third to talk about Robin Hood's Barn."

She stooped for another and another, and then, as Stayson noted, took a packet of six or eight into her lap, as if she understood they belonged together, and would not break the dramatic continuity of their reading even to lift them one by one. Were there ever such letters, he began to ask himself, his personal interest in the Wickhams and their effect on

Morton himself swamped now in the flood of a purely esoteric pleasure. The woman's were at first a little precise, as of one who had undertaken the task of submitting her own stiff handicraft to an author who knew the best and how to do it. But he had never seen Speed so unconfined, so given up to the robust humor of a galloping fancy. For some reason, Speed had plainly liked the stiff little letters and guessed inevitably what they covered: a reserved, delicate nature blossoming out all over in desires not conscious of themselves. Speed, he knew, was not a man who wrote to women out of the channel of a misnamed sentimentalism. He had been ever mistrustful of the emotions under a platonic dress. At first, Stayson thought, he believed this woman to be older than she was. Everybody knew Morton Wickham, and one who had never seen the wife might readily conclude, from her sedate way of expressing herself, that she was of an

equal age. But now the letters, her side of them, began to flame out, as Speed inducted her into the possibilities of happiness. He had written her that he was at the opera the night before, and let himself go in a poetical transcript of the music Stayson almost wept over because he had not been able to filch it for the biography. And in two days the woman had fled up to the *matinée*, to hear the same opera alone. She couldn't do it often, she told him. It worried her husband to have her go about by herself, and he was not only too busy to go with her but nervously tired as well. Wickham, at that, gave a little sound, like a groan, and Stayson could only formulate his own comment in an unspoken "Poor devil!" and a wonder why, when it was all too late, Wickham must be made to pay his scot. But, he knew, it must always have been too late, even if retribution had come in her lifetime. Wickham was one of those who, constrained

by the inexorable destiny of natal bent, could not, save by the miracle of will or grace, have listened to the voice of men or angels. Was he listening now, when one seemed to have risen from the dead? Adelaide Wickham mentioned him in the letters with a decent constancy. "My husband and I," she wrote, "went round to look at the pear trees in bloom." That might have covered the spring progress of Lancelot and Guinevere, but Cathie read it drily, in an unconscious irony, knowing, without doubt, to what meagre walk the wife had urged him. "My husband and I—" the conjunction occurred with a polite, even a devoted frequency; but after it had been remembered, as one might usher the chaperon into the room and seat her, with her knitting, by the window, the two minds seemed to take hands and dance the gayest measure of according joyousness. At one point definitely to be noted, humor came to the surface in Adelaide

Wickham's letters, a delicate play of fancy as unconsidered as the rout of dryads on a mountain top, escaped from winter and the tree. And to all this Gilman Speed was a splendid second, the answering note, to her lilting melody the underlying bass.

"No," Stayson said involuntarily, in a pause between two letters, "I've never known him. Nobody has ever really known Speed."

"Just one woman," said Cathie, having settled that matter long ago in her own mind. "She couldn't help knowing him. And it was just as easy! Simply because they were born to understand. Come, let's get on," she added hastily, thinking no doubt, of Wickham who sat there huddled into himself and so forgotten by them, in his remote insufficiency, that through the course of a half dozen letters they had not remembered him at all.

Stayson, too, gave him a comprehending glance, and wondered again whether Wickham

might be spared. It seemed no harm to anybody, no breach of valid contract with the dead if he should be allowed to slip out now and get back to the seclusion of his solitary game. But he evidently had no idea of doing that. Either because he was afraid of Cathie's mastering eye or her stated mandate, or whether he was constrained by an agonized curiosity, or his duty to the dead, no one could tell; but he stayed as if his place there had been decreed.

Now the talk in the letters was all of Robin Hood's Barn. They planned their little settlements, stately houses of the Georgian type, big yards about them, a reconstruction of the old serene life of luxury two hundred years ago. Each was to be presided over by a creature evolved out of their joint brains—they called her "Marian" always whether from Maid Marian, they did not say—or "Mrs. Sherwood", a patent reference to the Forest—and she was to be the most adroit of organizers,

the most undaunted of housekeepers in every emergency, the most exquisite of gentlewomen. Her mastery over affairs was only to be equalled by her elegance in presiding at the table. Here the fun came in. There were household tragedies, with Mrs. Sherwood ever to the fore, majestically uncoiling tangled circumstance. The water pipes froze, and Mrs. Sherwood sat at the crucial elbow all night with hot water bags and kerosene lamps. The cooks—all of them in all the Robin Hoods, an army of them—got at once at the cherry brandy and lay in windrows under the kitchen tables. But nothing was the worse. Mrs. Sherwood, miraculously omnipresent, made strawberry shortcake for that day's dinner, and cleared a hasty soup. Once, when the guests fell dismal on a rainy day, Mrs. Sherwood donned a costume gloriously improvised out of window curtains and gave them Hamlet's soliloquy and a vaudeville stunt. She was as familiar to these two

as they were to each other. They adored her, and at the same time "died-a-laughing" over her. She it was—a replica in each Robin Hood—who was to receive the guests and, according to their need, give them the acme of the gentlest or the gayest time. The guests were to be—well, anybody, it seemed, assorted according to the necessities of the moment, and therefore placed in whatever Robin Hood would be likely to afford them most appropriate service. For example, one Robin Hood might on some month be the refuge of tired scholars and gentlewomen who wouldn't interfere with their pursuits. At another it might be a convalescent home. There was one courting Robin Hood, with chaperons, stone deaf, in every bush. The machinery would be easily moved, because there was so much money to move it. That was a part of Speed's whimsical certainty that somehow, sometime he was going to have money, though up to that point he had

made none at all, as it is counted. For before this there had come the only real betrayal in the letters. Adelaide had written: "I don't know how, but my mind seems to have waked up. I am trying to understand business. I have been trying now for a good many weeks. I read the papers. And I do not think, even if my husband should agree with me about putting his money into Robin Hoods, that I could do it. I am afraid it would bring ill luck."

And at the end of that letter was a hurried line, almost a breathless one: "I have told my husband I have said this to you."

Again there was that small, choked, protesting sound from Wickham; but now they could not look at him. He was that most pathetic of all figures, a man who had had chances of various sorts, warm, big chances, and had bartered them away for a starved old age. But Speed had risen to that, in a very manly and

common sense fashion. Without waste of words he told her she mustn't be fain of moral casuistry. (It was very beautiful, the way he told her, as if she were a child and belonged to him, yet quite simply and with no sentimental flavor to offend good taste.) If she did not like "business" (that was the way he put it, but it most evidently covered to him, as to her, a scorn of the accepted disgraces of certain business) let her shovel the midden of gigantic gains into the enriching of the roots of life. Let her make Robin Hoods blossom and grow—grow fast, grow tall. Here Stayson turned to Adelaide, sitting spellbound, with flaming cheeks and eyes fixed unmovingly upon Cathie.

"You see," he said, in a quick, low tone. "That's what I should have told you this morning. I'm not so wise as Speed."

"You're not so old!" she took time from the letters to rebuke him jealously for himself.

"But that's the thing I ought to have said,"

he insisted, while Cathie waited, her eyes on the unfinished line.

"Yes," Adelaide agreed, "it's all simple. It's all clear. We'll build Robin Hoods."

But Speed assured his lady in the next line that nevertheless she'd see what Robin Hoods he'd build when his ship came in, when the next novel and the next brought chests of doubloons and the crowns of savage kings. The savage kings, he explained, in one of his digressions, were the critics. But there was only one novel more, they all remembered here. Then he died, and though it did bring in a golden wave, his nephew, a man of money himself, inherited, and the Robin Hoods were never built. With a half dozen more, all plans about the house—why, Adelaide Wickham even planned the dotted muslin curtains, and the card table by the window, and the fire dogs, and Speed drew diagrams of gardens—the letters stopped abruptly with no farewells: for Speed had died.

"And she—" Stayson hesitated in asking Cathie, hoping she would supply the unfinished query, as she did.

"Adelaide died in less than six months," she said briefly, and closed the cover on the last letter.

Then they thought of Wickham, and Adelaide, who had in all gentle yet common-place ways, taken care of him through these years of her grown-up life, went to him with a swift movement, pushed a stool to his feet, and sat there in a quick abandonment to the first real affection he had ever roused in her. Stayson could see, reading her as he believed he did, that excessive pity had bred in her maternal warmth, and she needed to assure Wickham, most unfriended as life had left him, that she, at least, did love him. She would stand by.

But Stayson had a very human and business-like instinct of his own.

"I've got to have those letters," he said to Cathie. "I've simply got to have them."

Cathie looked up at him with her dry, sad little smile.

"Going to murder me for them?" she inquired. "Well, you'd find it easy to knock over an old woman in the dark—if I take 'em home with me, and I think I shall."

"You an old woman!" Stayson threw in, while he wondered whether the letters didn't really belong to him as Speed's advocate on earth, at the same time noting the roundness of her cheek, the flush of it, and the shimmering but quite appropriate hue of her dress. "You an old woman!"

"I'm seventy-one this day," she returned, with composure. "Seventy-one."

"It is your birthday, Cathie, and I forgot," Adelaide put in with compunction, though she was really bent on watching Wickham's face. "So many things were happening—but I did forget."

"It isn't well to mention 'em after seventy," said Cathie. She had gone back to what Stayson, when he first saw her, thought he should characterize as a higgledy-piggledy manner. It implied either the disorderly mind of one who had given up every idea that there was any use in keeping accurate house any longer, the time being short, and things considered necessary amounting to very little anyway: so that one might as well set flowers in the sink and use the best linen every day. "Mercy! mother's ninety-four, and she said this morning, 'I'm as young as ever I was, if only I could see and hear and get about.' But I shouldn't tell her she was ninety-four. My stars, no! So don't you tell me I'm seventy-one. I'll mention it myself, though, when I happen to feel it."

"What is it?" Adelaide was asking Wickham as he bent to her, and the others understood him to say:

"They must be burned. They must be burned," three times, fortifying himself in his demand by the sound of the words.

"But they're beautiful letters, dear," Adelaide was urging. "It would be dreadful to burn them. It would be wicked. They show us what she was."

Here he made a little futile motion of his gloved hands, seeming to say he knew what she was, and the remembrance was, for many reasons, too terrible to him, now she was no more. Adelaide was soothing him.

"Anyway, not yet," she was saying. "We've got to read them over and get them by heart, so as to do things as she wanted. We've got to do it, uncle. We've got to put in our own money—why, every cent of it,—and build her Robin Hoods."

Wickham straightened himself in the chair and spoke quite clearly now. This was a statement he had known he must sometime make,

if he were so ill-fortuned as to live, and he made it, without apparent feeling.

"There is no money."

"No money where?" Adelaide asked vaguely.

"There is no money."

Cathie was the first one to divine him.

"You don't mean to say, Mr. Wickham," she said, with her glittering ruthlessness, "you've gambled it all away?"

"The market has been against me for a number of years," said Wickham, seeming to formulate for the millionth time a fact he had dwelt on to exhaustion. "Crazy markets, nowadays, crazy markets."

"But there's the place," Adelaide reminded him. "All the houses, all that land."

"They went years ago," he said. Then he apparently forgot them, forgot the letters and the land. "I think I'll go to bed," he ended, and rose haltingly. But at the door he paused, in a vague remembrance of what had gone be-

fore. He spoke with a stiff dignity of upright pose and ordered syllables. "You are not to concern yourself about it, niece. There was a little money left—a few thousands only. I put it into Ricefields. It will be all right tomorrow. We shall recoup ourselves."

Then they heard his halting step go up the stairs. Adelaide rose from her lowly seat and stood quite still, not moved, Stayson could see, but thoughtful. Her serious face had paled, and taken on a look of wonderment, a recognition of the vastness and variety of hue in the web we call life. But Stayson, outside himself at last, all tumultuous recognition of the individual call, wanted only to bring her back, to awaken her to their joint destiny, his and her own, their colossal duty to life itself. He had taken one of her clenched hands and held it, wondering angrily how he could pry the fingers open and get it into his own demanding clasp.

"Don't you see what it means?" he said still

angrily because she did not see at once as well as he. "You and I are going to do it. There's no money in the way, no money anywhere in sight. But we've got to do it, you and I. I acted like a fool this morning. But I wasn't a fool. I was as sane as ever I was in my life—and I am now. We've got to do it after we're married, you and I."

Then she did look at him, and her hand relaxed, but she took it quietly away. She laughed, a wholesome sound. Stayson, in his new impatience with her that she was not keeping pace with him, could have taken her by the shoulders and shaken her for it. Also, he reflected afterward, still in that tumult that seemed like anger, he could have sobered the mouth that laughed with the mastering touch of his.

"No," she said, "that's perfectly ridiculous. I sha'n't marry anybody."

"I'm going home now," said Cathie, standing

with her box uncomfortably under her arm. "Yes, marry him, Adelaide. If I was younger I wouldn't let you know I heard; but it doesn't matter. I'm only a kind of a grasshopper chirping out of the dry stubble. Good-night, Mr. Stayson. I'm seventy-one, and I'm tired all over."

"But you're taking the letters," Adelaide reminded her. She was moved by what had gone before but ignoring it now, seeking for a calm.

"Yes," said Cathie. "They're my letters. They were left to me."

Stayson had got his hat and waited beside her. Now he put his hand on the box. Cathie looked up at him with a whimsical seriousness.

"Going to carry them? That all you going to do?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Give them up when you get to the house?"

"Yes."

"That's a good boy. I guess you'd better carry them. They're heavy. I'm seventy-one. Good night, Adelaide. Go to bed and sleep."

"Yes," said Adelaide sedately. "Mr. Stayson, will you bolt the door when you come in?"

"Yes," he responded, as gravely, not looking at her. "You won't wait up."

"No."

She went with them to the steps, and while she stood there in the moonlight, as they looked back at her, almost of heroic size in her white dress, Cathie threw her a last word.

"Say a prayer, Adelaide. Say 'Lord, remember me when I'm seventy-one.'"

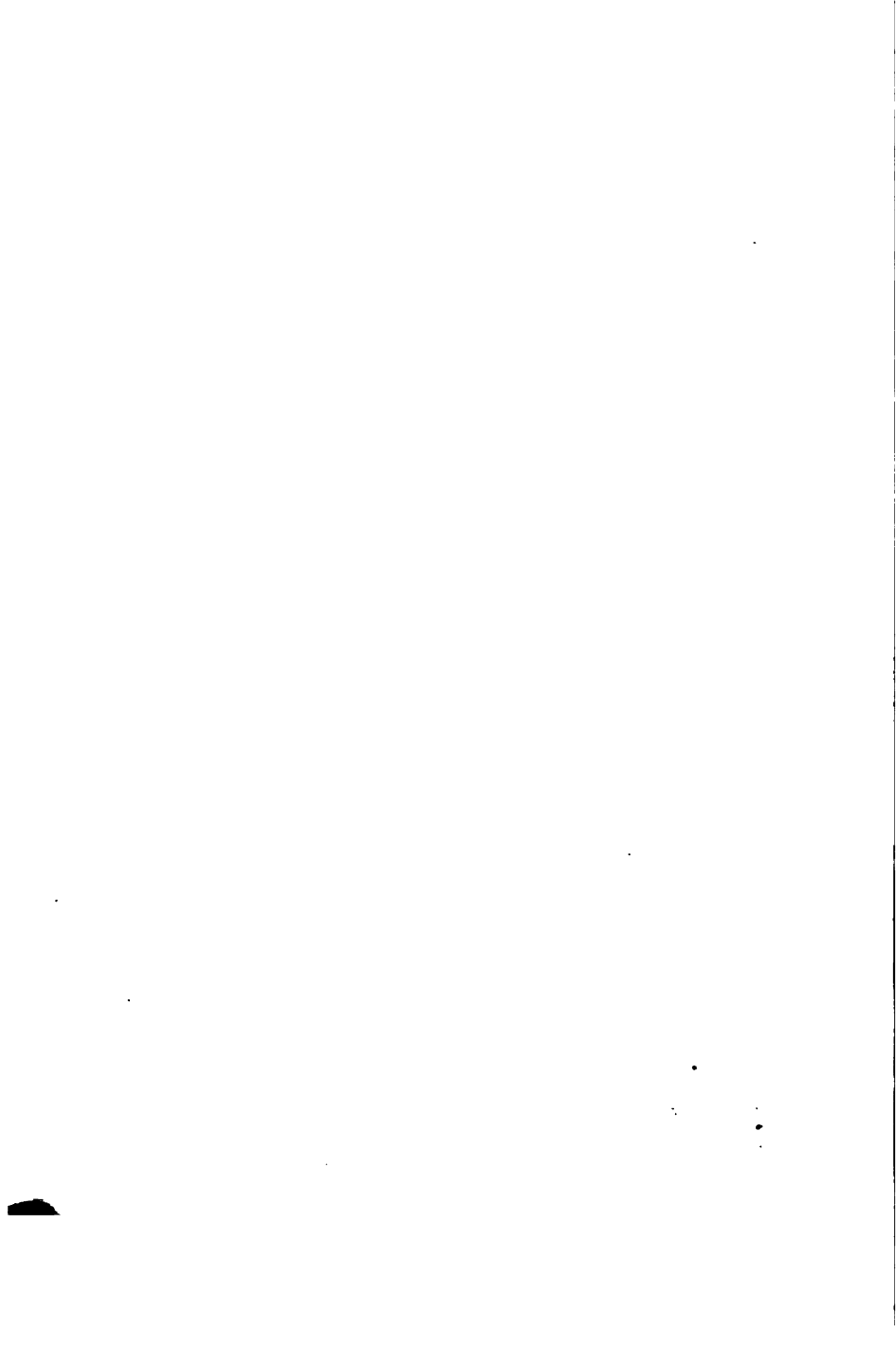




"LORD, REMEMBER ME WHEN I'M SEVENTY-ONE"



CHAPTER VI



VI

STAYSON'S first definite consciousness when he woke after a heavy sleep, bewildered at finding himself in a room that was not his attic, so far had his mind gone in the night, was that he must get away, simply because he was in too far to keep his poise in this heady atmosphere. These matters were not his so long ago as yesterday; yet they had surprisingly become so. But he knew also that he must not think of going until the balance of things had been restored if, indeed, anything except the dear mind of Adelaide had ever been very sane here. As he dressed, the thought of her kept coming, and his face grew hot remembering that he had pushed at her some sort of wild demands couched in what words he chose not to recall. It was a pretty way to please a

modern girl, he reflected, to knock her down like the savage and throw her over his shoulder to be borne to hypothetical Georgian mansions with trim yards to be established for the pleasuring of unknown guests.

When he went down, it was with a poor sense of his own courteous deserts; but meeting Adelaide at the table, he judged, with a sudden chagrin, that she had forgotten all about it. Whatever munificent proffer of himself he had made in the delirium of the night before, she was not remembering. She greeted him rather soberly, and when they had their plates before them, Stayson, perhaps a little piqued, perhaps jealously hurt in the midst of his relief that she could forget, announced his necessity of going back to the city that day. This she accepted gravely, indeed as if there were no other course.

"About the letters?" she said then. "Of course they could be sent you."

He looked up at her in a candid questioning.

"You don't for a minute think I'm going to get the letters?"

She answered with no appearance of arguing it, but as if she knew perfectly and had no need whatever of considering a doubt.

"Of course you must have the letters."

"She refused," he reminded her, "definitely."

"Did you talk about it on the way home?"

"No, I couldn't bring it up. She seemed too tired. But you heard what she said here."

"I see what Cathie thinks," Adelaide went on, not in a way of comparing arguments with his, but following back in her own mind the paths by which she had known Cathie. "She's thinking of Aunt Adelaide."

"Of course. She doesn't want to drag her out of her seclusion. I don't blame her. But Aunt Adelaide was a wonder. I'm not sure whether in this particular age, wonders haven't got to be displayed."

"Against their will?" she reminded him quickly. "It would have been against her will. She'd have died a thousand deaths rather than have her heart given to the world."

"So you know it was her heart?"

"Yes, just as you do. She loved Gilman Speed, loved him, loved him. But I don't believe she knew she did. And she doesn't want prying, insinuating people to know."

"Are we prying, insinuating people? Am I?"

"You? no. Nor any of us here. We adore her. But we don't want her to be mauled over by women's clubs and critics."

"No, oh, no!"

"Still," she continued, "I do believe—I've thought so without changing my opinion once, and I've thought all night—I do believe you ought to have his letters, though not hers."

"Speed's?"

"Yes. Couldn't you use them without tell-

ing who his correspondent was, without saying it was a woman at all?"

He debated.

"I could if I remember them. Yes, without altering a single line. It would have to be a magazine article unless I inserted them in later editions."

"And wouldn't your publishers agree?"

"Surely. They'd agree to the magazine and agree to the insertion in the book. They own book and magazine. Of course they'd agree."

"And here," said Adelaide, putting down her napkin, "here comes Cathie."

While her step was yet sounding on the veranda, Stayson said hurriedly:

"One minute. See your uncle. Stop his buying Ricefields."

She gave him a little recalling smile to what he must know of the extent they could either of them see her swaying Wickham and his game.

"Do you think I could?" she inquired plainly.

"But I've done something more crude than that. This morning I telephoned his brokers. They were kind, but they almost laughed at me. They thought I knew. For a long, long time he's been giving them futile orders and not remembering they weren't filled. He's no 'equity', they said. They explained. There's no more money to risk."

"So he said last night. Do you believe it?"

"Of course I believe it. I can look back now and see a lot of things. He's been juggling for years and he hasn't been capable of teaching a child how to count. He's been juggling and I've been signing things. Oh, yes, the money's gone."

"Don't you care?" he asked her quickly, for Cathie was in the hall, putting down her parasol.

"Yes, I care—for the Robin Hoods."

"Not for yourself?"

"I should hope not." She smiled across at him in the radiant security that ought ever to

be dwelling with a sound body in its youth. "I should say not. I'm so curious I don't know what to do to see whether I can earn a living wage. Isn't that what they call it, a living wage?"

Stayson was answering her smile with a gay and tumultuous recognition that youth is, after all, about the best thing there is: youth and the gates open before it.

"Do you know what I should like to call you?" he inquired. "A sport, a dead game sport."

"I don't know." She shook her head and wrinkled her brows, in disclaimer. "No, I guess not. I cried last night—over uncle and the Robin Hoods. Come in, Cathie; we're waiting for you."

But with Cathie on the threshold, Stayson leaned across to get Adelaide's look and hold her eyes for a last moment with his.

"You shall have your Robin Hoods," he

said, in a tone as peremptory as he could make it.

But he was not sure she heard him. Cathie, the Cathie he had seen on the first day of his stay, with her crispness of dress and her lovely rose in the cheek and pretty carriage of the head, went straight to Adelaide and put down beside her the package she had brought. Then she sank into a neighboring chair and fanned herself with her morning fan. She had a great wealth of fans at home, one for each occasion, and this was twined all over with convolvulus.

"There are your letters," she told Adelaide. "Do what you please with them. I've done my stunt. You can do yours."

Adelaide's whole face brightened with inrushing color and a splendor of delighted wonder. Stayson, though he, too, felt like straining at them from the tightened leash of a decent self-control, had time to think it would be a great thing to read the story of them from her face,

as he could fancy it glowing above the written page.

"They're not the letters really," she was saying. "Not all of them?"

"No," said Cathie. "They're only Gilman Speed's. Do what you want to with 'em. I'm tired and sick of 'em. If I can get rid of 'em once for all, maybe I can settle down to something: being religious, growing old, maybe dying. They've been an awful care."

"These are Mr. Speed's alone. Where are Aunt Adelaide's?"

"At home on the top shelf of my closet in the bandbox great-aunt Sarah used to keep her leghorn bonnet in."

"But what are you going to do with them, Cathie? What are you going to do?"

"Burn 'em," said Cathie. "The first rainy day so I can have a fire in the sitting-room without roasting to death. I'm going to burn 'em up."

"That's right," Stayson conceded, when Adelaide looked at him. "Oh, yes, that's right."

"He'd say it was," Cathie returned composedly, using her fan.

"Speed?" Stayson inquired.

"No, no, bless you, no. Morton Wickham, her lawful husband. That's what he said last night. 'Burn 'em,' said he. He's got every right to choose."

"But I don't see why you think he has rights," Adelaide put in, in her rebellious following on clear ways of thought. "You didn't last night. He forbade you to read them, and you did it in spite of him."

"I had my rights there," said Cathie, unmoved. "Speaking of rights, Mr. Stayson, the Green Hill stock has rights and mother and I sold ours. Do you think we were lunatics to sell right off, first go? But there, you needn't tell me. It's done, and if I don't find out I've

been a fool I needn't tell mother and she'll be none the worse."

This Stayson perceived, from his slight knowledge of her habit of mind, was only a suggested thought, a trick of verbal connection, and had no reference whatever to the matter in hand.

"So you felt your trust was over," he recalled her. "You've read the letters to Mr. Wickham, and that concludes the matter."

"Well, doesn't it?" She looked up at him. "Shouldn't you say it did? Anyway, that's what Adelaide told me before she died."

"Was it in her will?" Adelaide Wickham asked, with no purpose save to keep the dead woman as long as possible in the centre of attention. "Or didn't she make a will?"

"Oh, no, she made a memorandum on a slip of paper."

"And Uncle Morton knew? That's why he seemed to find it so—so inevitable for you to hold the letters?"

"No," said Cathie, "he never saw it. Nobody did, but me."

"Well," Adelaide mused, "I don't see why he was so yielding with you."

"Mercy sakes, Adelaide," said Cathie, rising from her chair, "anybody'll yield if you look 'em in the face and same time think to yourself you'll tan their jackets if they don't. Well, Mr. Stayson, good-bye. *Au revoir*. We shall see you again. The *raisonneuse* is going."

They walked with her to the steps, and she looked back at them from under her bright parasol, looked with a dauntless smile that included her defiance of age and the things life could do to her.

"Isn't she game!" demanded Stayson, out of his wonder, and Adelaide nodded.

Her eyes were full of tears.

"Now," said he, "come in. We must look over the letters together and catalogue them. They're worth money."

"Money!" he heard her say under her breath. The tone held not so much scorn of it as amazement that in a world full of beautiful and heroic things money had got to enter at every keyhole or, refusing to linger, be the scorching wind to warp the heart and mind. But she went with him into the cool west room where new leaves were stirring at the window, and again they read the letters. Stayson was the one to read them, and she took each after he had finished and set its date down on a bit of paper. When they had done, they looked at each other in a community of grave feeling, and Stayson thought, with a moved pondering over the richness of life, that he not only knew Speed a great deal better than he had after those months of studying him, but that he knew—incredible wonder of it!—three women also, Aunt Adelaide, Cathie, and this girl. The last letter on the pile, she wrapped their paper about them and passed the whole over to him.

"Whatever remains to do," she said, "you're to do it. Publish them if you like. No, publish them anyway. I couldn't rest easy if they weren't published."

"I'll do what I can," he assured her. "That is, I'll do it the best way I can."

They had not heeded Morton Wickham standing there in the door, swaying rather, waiting for his moment. To Adelaide, it seemed of dry consequence indeed, after the flaming hopes they had been following, the window they had found open toward the east, whether Morton Wickham's mathematical mistakes concerning money alone, should or should not be made. She put up her hand to her hair, and pushed it into place where the long leaning of her head had loosed it, and drew a breath of delight in the morning, in the sunlight, what they had been reading, and the way things can happen. Morton Wickham, seeing his chance in their moment of silence, spoke and drew their quickened gaze to him.

"The market has gone off," he said, almost as if it pleased him, if so colorless a mind as his could now be pleased. "Ricefields is below par."

"Par is fifty," Stayson erratically explained, while Adelaide jumped to her feet and came wide awake to Wickham's queerness. She put her hand on the old man's arm, and Wickham, in a tenderness he had never taken thought to bestow on her before, patted it with his gloved palm.

"It's come out," Stayson proceeded, "that about Ricefields. It'll run down like a stitch in a web. There's nothing in it, nothing," he reiterated, bound now that he had Wickham's ear, to drive the matter home, even if Wickham's game were only the sham they said it was. "There isn't a cent to be made out of it. There's everything to be lost."

"So you see," Wickham continued, with the same unmeaning smile. "So you see."

And that was all he would say, though she urged him with kind devices to go with her to his own room and there rest from the coil of thought. Only she did not put it that way. She pretended there were things she wanted him to help her about upstairs, a book to find that could be nowhere but on his desk; and at last he did turn with her, still repeating, in a contented tone, "So you see."

Stayson did not meet her again until luncheon, and then she was her own alert self, informing him before he had asked:

"He's just the same. It was the news about his stock. But he's almost happy. He seems to have given up something, and it's left him different. Why, I almost think he's going to be easy now. Why should he be? What does it mean?"

"He hasn't got to speculate any more," said Stayson. "He's no money. His chances are gone. You don't know—we don't any of us

know—what a strain it's been to keep up the old game with no capital and brains gone—gone tired," he added lamely. "But you can't have the care of him. You mustn't stay alone."

"I'm not alone," she said, with a gentleness of dignity. "There's Cathie."

So Stayson, that afternoon, knowing perfectly well she wished it, bade her good-bye and thanked her, stiffly, he afterward thought, considering their richness, for the bewildering days. When the shabby station carriage took him down the drive he looked back just once—and she was not there on the steps where they had said their grave farewell. She seemed to decree the finality of their parting, though the last words she had said to him were: "Good luck. Here's to Robin Hood." With a magnificent sedateness she was ignoring his rash court of her. She was taking it, in his own phrases, as a part of the bewildering spring.

* * * * *

It was nearly a year before he saw her again. Through the course of it, he never let himself set a bound to their separation, or reason on the foolishness of staying apart when there were such things to talk about. But they wrote, at first often and then a pelting interchange of letters, as events grew thicker about them and they had to compare comments day by day. There were two reasons for Stayson's not going down to her: one that he was convinced she did not want him,—this from the stiffness of her report that uncle was not very well and they were seeing nobody but Cathie—and the other his own determination not to go until he had made good. The Robin Hood Letters he had published in a rush as soon as he could get them into print, and almost obscurely, because it was too late for proper heralding. They came out in a thin sober book that asked nothing on the score of binding, but everything from the name of Gilman Speed. Stayson was in

such haste about it because he wanted to get some money together for her, money she could legitimately take: for he made a wry face in remembering she wouldn't touch a penny from him, and the only penny he at present knew how to endow her with she could come into only by his death: for he had had his life insured. He did not wonder at all over the enormous responsibility he felt about her, nor his longing to see her, neither of them having anything to do with the passion called love as it is commonly conceived. That he still regarded as a madness sure to pass; but this was mysteriously assuming a whole set of relations at once: Adelaide herself, Cathie for her sake, and even dried-up and almost blown-away old Wickham. As to Adelaide, he had the unswerving determination that she should be happy and secure. Whatever uncertainty of fortune Morton Wickham had brought upon her was now to be supplanted by some infallible safety appliance

that should ensure her untouched spirit from mischance in too hard a world. So he began to write his play, wondering if there were money in it, but chiefly because the thing seemed, now he had thought of it, so easy to do, so really hard to keep from doing. He didn't concoct it, as he had piled up his structural novels and stories. It came at first hand a living thing, the easy transcript of life as he saw it now, a big web of warm colors always being aired and shaken in the sun. Some self inside him did it, a very easy comfortable self, not prosing about the universe, but sitting with its pipe, and an idle hand on the chair arm, looking through the window and painting life as it must actually be. The colors were different, as the eyes saw them now. They weren't so exactly patterned as they used to be, there weren't such multifarious lights and caverns of impressionist purple; it was simply a sketchy map of the warm darling old world, clad very

much as it might be to children going to school through country lanes before they have learned there is anything to be trusted less than mother's love: yet not a saccharine, sentimental bower, but just life, dear life.

"That," he said to himself one night, contemplating his third act with a queer and totally unaccustomed view of its inevitableness, something that had never happened to him before, in any work he had done, "that's the change that came over Gilman Speed after he knew Adelaide Wickham. That's what made him write his lasting book."

There was a sequence to this, and his mind would have caught it, but at that moment the mail came in and he took up what he called to Adelaide in his message to her within an hour, and what they tacitly agreed to call always, "the amazing letter". Stayson, glancing first at the name at the end of three closely written pages, was perplexed to find it that of the

regnant millionaire, the man whose money had seemed to flow in on him in spite of his having kept the laws of Justice to other poorer men. "Another biography," Stayson thought, and swore instantly he'd see him further; now, having the taste of creating in his mouth, he was never going back to record some other man's complete achievement. But the letter was to another tenor. Gilman Speed's last book, that was the text of it. The millionaire had read it shortly after the accident through which his only son was killed, and it was the one thing that served to hold his head above water until he got his grip again. He had read the Robin Hood Letters the minute they were published. Should read anything raked up from Speed, now unhappily no more. But the point was, he had become immensely interested in the Robin Hood plans, not only because they were Speed's, but because the design seemed to him entirely feasible. He was prepared to give

five hundred thousand, first go off, to start the ball, and Stayson was at liberty to publish the offer, with no mention of his name, to see how many other people felt like joining. He thought it best the whole thing should be anonymous. It should be Speed, all Speed from start to finish. What did Stayson think?

Stayson hardly knew what he thought, save that he was confounded with delight, until he had specialised the letter to Adelaide; but that night's edition of the paper contained the rich man's offer and an appeal to the public to know what they, too, thought of it.

There was no long waiting to find out. The public evidently considered itself a fool to have needed that hint from plutocracy. It should have thought of it itself, for it had never ceased one minute from loving Speed, not since his last book was out. In the most intimate and incredible way everybody seemed to discover that this was something they could do for Speed.

They could pay back their debt to him. They could build his Robin Hoods. And other considerations followed, the chief being that they loved, *per se*, the idea of Robin Hoods.

Money came in drops, in showers, in floods. Stayson found himself surrounded with it, and thought of Danaë. But his rich man, who knew the large ways of management, helped him here and gave crisp counsel. There seemed no end to its rolling in, and Stayson one morning in April clad that year like May, looked up from his signed contract with his manager and, without a word to himself, a word of explanation or reason, flung some clothes into a bag, and started for the station to tell it all to Adelaide, as no letter lately seemed to do.'

As he went, he broke into a laugh. It was unpremeditated, he knew, this sudden flight on the heels of his play's acceptance: for though he had meant to see her after he had made good, it need not be so breathlessly soon.

Yet the things he had tumbled into the bag had been ready in a pile by themselves for a week, like a maid's pretty clothes laid out for holiday. He was not even sure the bag itself had not stood gaping open. It was spring, he laughed and almost shouted. It was the time for fun, and he could rest, so far as Robin Hoods would let him and maybe—incredible rapture!—the rehearsals of his own play.

He did not take a carriage at the station. It seemed desirable, for some reason, to steal upon them and perhaps filch the double welcome of surprise. There was no change in the country road from that other day when he had seen it first, no change in the day even, warm as that had been, no change in anything but himself, younger by far, more full of bounding blood than that other arriving guest. What Stayson was now, in the cataloguing of qualities, he failed to know; but he was hopefully sure he was not a prig. And then, turning the curve

of the winding drive, he came upon sight of them, three on the veranda at their quiet deeds. Adelaide was standing, a slim white figure, turned exactly toward him as if she had been looking for him. Wickham and Cathie, she a note of pink, sat at a round table with something spread out between them. Stayson thought it might be cards. He struck into a better pace, and at some hint of him, a word from Adelaide it might be, or his approaching aura, Cathie looked up. The instant following, she rose, laid a hand on Wickham's arm and seemed to help him in, pushing back his chair preliminary to rising. It was all accomplished so hurriedly that Stayson did not see whether it was like a flight or not. Besides he was watching Adelaide. But they did, Wickham with Cathie guiding him, disappear instantly within the hall, and Adelaide was coming down across the grass. It occurred to him in that instant, a commonplace instant he might

have thought, if his breath had not so choked him, that it was only like a man's coming home from work and his wife's meeting him. He stopped, set down his bag and put out his hands to her. He had only time to see how gravely sweet her face was, yet how the gladness sprang out all over it in color and in quivering responsiveness. She was all youth, too, as he felt it in the day and in the world. They had been through some pretty serious things together lately, in their written conferences over money and its end to Gilman Speed's desires; but there was evidently that born in them which was to inherit the earth and use it as it was, in its spring, all posies and warm winds.

Stayson, with that bewilderment on him of finding himself the man come home from work to meet his wife, instantly kissed her in a sober haste. Then he lost that sense of fitness to the occasion, and put his arms about her and kissed her like young love. Adelaide laughed out and

drew herself away, very beautiful in his amazed eyes, with that glamour of the bride upon her. And all that occurred to him to say was:

"Where's Cathie?"

And neither of them remembered that once he had given his love to her like a blow or that she had repulsed it, having "other things to do".

"Bring your suit-case," Adelaide bade him most practically. "I knew you'd come today."

"I didn't tell you," Stayson said, as they went up the steps together.

"No."

She looked for an instant at the sky and the trembling green of the nearer trees. They, too, she knew, had called him. The mounting sun had been her messenger. Cathie, who had disappeared to let them have their meeting, judging that the first rapture of it was over, came out again. Here she was, immortal youth, Stayson thought, and wished he dared say so



"HE PUT HIS ARMS ABOUT HER AND KISSED HER LIKE YOUNG LOVE"



without suggesting the antithesis—all pink of cheek and dress, and with the glistening whiteness of her hair merely like some crown she had elected to crown herself withal.

“I’m just delighted,” she said, with no affectation of his not being a very old friend. “What a wizard you are. Think of your building the Robin Hoods, after all.”

“Think of Speed’s building them,” he bade her remember, “so long after he thought he’d done building. Think of the royalties of that last book rolling in like this—for it’s just royalties, after all, the Robin Hoods are. Does he know it?”

He nodded in the direction of the library where he supposed Wickham to be.

“Yes,” Adelaide answered. “We tell him. We thought it would be—” she hesitated for a word that should express perhaps the justice of including poor Wickham, who seemed to have shut himself out from all these tapestried

chambers—"nice," she ended ineffectually; but he understood.

"What does he say?"

"Nothing. Not very much. He likes to be told, though. But he isn't really interested in anything but these."

She laid her hand on the ordered disarray of his interrupted occupation.

"Picture puzzles!"

"Yes. He does them all day long. He's very clever at them."

"He doesn't follow the market?"

"Mercy, no," said Cathie, "he doesn't know there is a market, any more than I do. If I ever did know it, I'd forget it, hideous thing! Come, what's the last news of Robin Hood?"

"The last news," said Stayson, and then paused to let their curiosity make his period more complete. "The last news is just incredible. No, not any more than all the rest

It's all incredible. But no more—" he went back to say, his eyes on Adelaide,—“than that the prime mover in the thing isn't to be mentioned in it at all—ever.”

“Adelaide Wickham?” Cathie nodded. “No. But that's as she would have had it.”

“It's all Speed,” Stayson went on. “He's the one to be remembered. Just as, if a fellow wrote a play, he'd get the credit of it, and the woman he wrote it for and that made him write it because she was so splendid, stays in her nest up in the tree somewhere, and nobody knows it's she that's made him sing so loud and pull out the worms so handy. So with the Robin Hoods. They're all Speed, Speed.”

“Of course,” said Adelaide. “But it's the same thing. *She* was Speed, Aunt Adelaide was. She just adored him.”

It was a full, lustrous look she gave Stayson, with no bravado in it, but the high challenge of adoring him and wanting him to know as

soon as possible how much he was adored. Cathie cut the look short, perhaps conjecturing it might end in kissing. She tapped Stayson's arm.

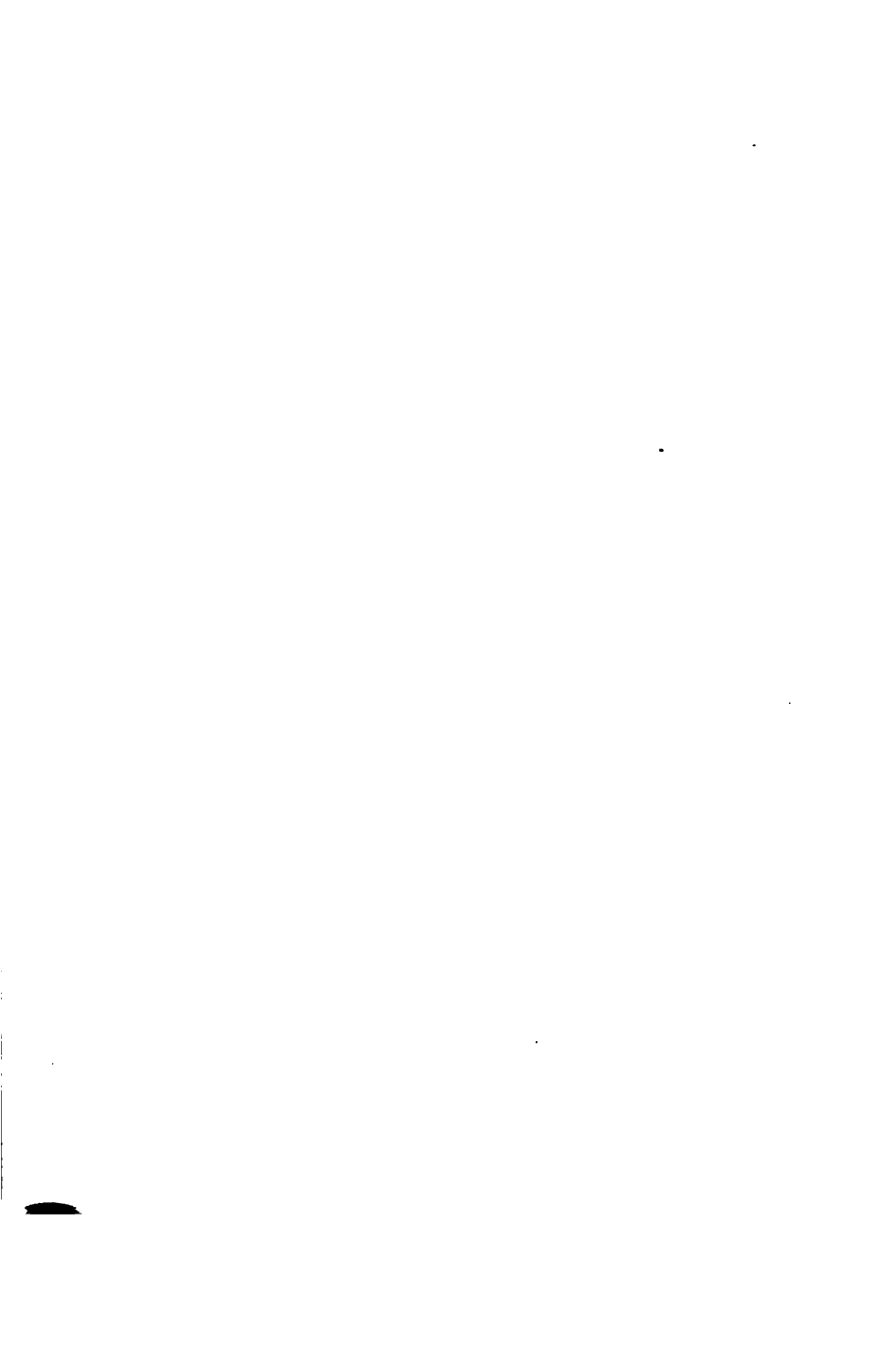
"Come, come," she said. "I've got to run along. What's the thing you have to tell, the incredible thing?"

"Why, this." Stayson's tone and his compelling face bade them consider the beautiful wonder of it. "At first, you know, the millionaires chipped in. But now—it's been going on for two months and I haven't told you because it was so splendid I wanted to knock you down with it—the subscriptions are coming in by dollars, quarters, even. See how they're passing it on, as everything's been passed on now to all the last atoms that used to be forgotten, except by priests and women. First it was Adelaide Wickham; the woman conceived it. Then the man planned it for her. Then the world got hold of it—the big, rich

world—and laid the foundations. And now it's the people that are building it. Yes, by Jove! it's the people. Nothing less. They're building their own Robin Hoods."



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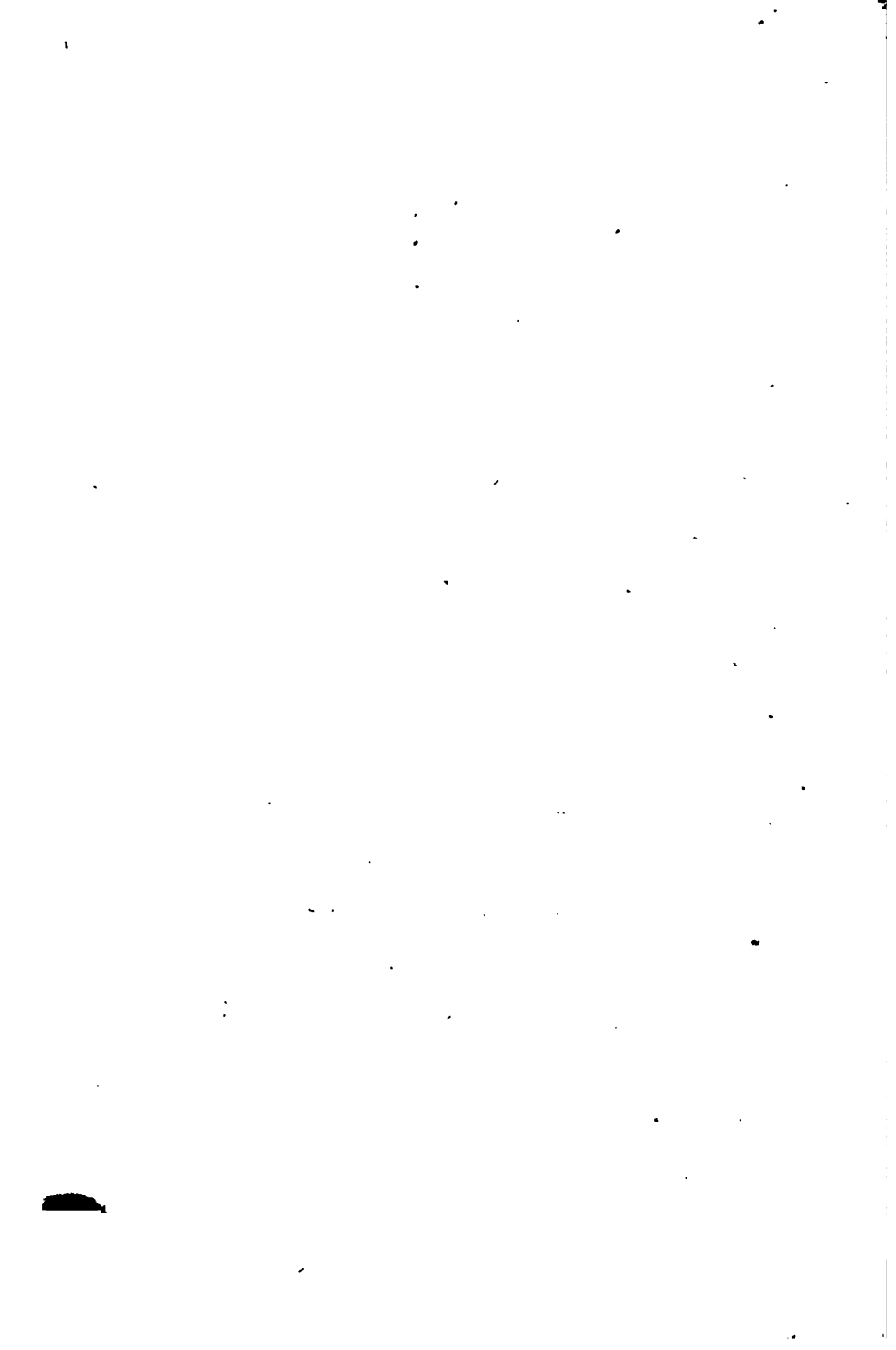
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